1, 2 AND 3 JOHN

“Little Children, I Write Unto You…”

Verse-by-verse through the Apostle John's epistles with Pastor David Legge
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Contents
1. INTRODUCTION TO 1 JOHN - 3
2. Authentic Christianity - 13
3. The Gospel According To Christ - 23
4. The Saint And Sin - 34
5. Practical Christianity - 45
6. The Christian And The World - 56
7. The Christian And False Doctrine - 67
8. The Family Likeness - 77
9. The Saint And The Sinful Existence - 87
10. Brotherly Love - 98
11. Confident Christianity - 109
12. Discerning Christianity - 120
14. The Features Of Effectual Faith - 141
15. The Case For Christ - 152
16. Sure Life And Prayer - 162
17. A Trinity Of Certainty And Security - 173
18. INTRODUCTION TO 2 JOHN - 183
19. Walking In Truth - 193
20. Handling Heresy - 202
22. Diotrephes - The Man Who Hindered God's Work - 225
23. Demetrius - The Man Who Was Honoured In God's Work - 236

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First John, the first epistle of John, if you can find 1 and 2 Peter, it's just after it - just before the book of Jude, the little book before the last book in the Bible, the book of the Revelation. So, if you can't find it after that, you're in trouble! Now, I haven't given this series a title, it's self-explanatory - 1 John - and the only title I have for tonight is 'An Introduction'. We'll not really be dealing with specific verses this evening in an expositional manner, I just want to give you somewhat of an overview and an introduction to this little book. I think that's important for our understanding in subsequent weeks, it gives us a backdrop and a context in which to fit our expositions from here on in.

We'll read the first four verses of chapter 1, just to get the flow of John's argument in the introduction of his epistle. Verse 1: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full".

Now this first epistle of John, of course, if you're familiar with the New Testament, you will know it's the first of three epistles - the second straight after it, and the third which are only a chapter long each. John, the author of these three epistles, is one of the sons of Zebedee, along with his brother James that we read of in the Gospels. But of course, they were christened again by the Lord Jesus Christ 'The Sons of Thunder', because of their vehement personalities. John was also one of the inner circle of intimate disciples that had special fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ when He was upon the earth, the other two being James and also Peter. As such, as one of the twelve, and one of the inner three, he had a unique eyewitness experience of the ministry, the earthly life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some would go as far as to say that, even beyond the inner circle of the three, that John was special, and indeed the Scriptures speak of him as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. There's something special about John and his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and indeed at the Last Supper he is found to be reclining on Jesus' breast.

Of course John, the author of 1, 2 and 3 John, is also - and many people don't realise this, believe it or not - the author of John's gospel, and indeed the last book in the Bible, the Apocalypse, the book of the Revelation. He wrote them all. But this book in particular, although it's called a letter, is not really like a letter in that it has no proper introduction, or address, or even close - and it seems to be, because of that, a circular letter, a letter that isn't specifically addressed to one person or a particular church. It's not like the book of Romans or Ephesians, it's not addressed to an individual like Timothy or Titus or Philemon. Yet, as we read it, though it's not addressed to specific people, we find that it is intensely personal - so personal, in fact, that John doesn't even feel the need to mention his own name to those he's writing to. He knows that they will know who is writing to them, and he is so attached to them, so intimate with them, that he bares his pastoral heart of compassion and
love for them, and so often we read of him calling this flock 'My beloved', or 'My little children'.

Now John's writings are dated near the end of the first century, probably somewhere between AD 85 and AD 95, and because of that John, as he is writing this first epistle, is a very old man. Now I want you to picture him, as he sits wherever he wrote this epistle with a quill and a piece of parchment, and there he is well over his pension age, and he looks back and reminisces over the life that he has lived with Christ - bodily on the earth - for Christ as an apostle, as an evangelist, as a missionary. He remembers all the experiences he had with the Lord, he reminisces concerning the rise and spread of Christianity across Europe - what must his thoughts have been?

I don't know about you, but I think it's rather interesting to hear what old men of God have to say - especially at the end of their lives. If you can get aside an old man of God, listen to the advice that, as the Bible puts it, 'the hoary head' of wisdom would give to you! In fact, a very famous evangelist in our world today recently said, as he is almost at the end of his life looking back on the years of service that he spent for the Lord, that he wished that he had spent more time studying God's word and praying to the Lord. When someone who is a great giant of the faith says something like that, we tend to sit up and listen because of the authority of the experience, the weight that is behind their statements and the life that they have lived. When proven servants of God speak, we ought to listen!

Now, here is John, the apostle, at the end of his life - and he is speaking with great authority and with great influence, because at this point he is the only apostle now still living. He's the only human being, really, who has had this intimate communion with the Lord Jesus in bodily form as He was upon the earth. So he speaks to these believers with a fatherly counsel. As we see in chapter 2 and verse 1, he says to them: "Little children" - 'This is the message that I give to you, as I look and scour over the whole of my life and I assess where the church of Christ is at this particular juncture in its history, this is the message that I feel that God would have me bring to you'.

So what does he say? Well, that's one of the difficulties, because some have found it hard, in a sense, to analyse this little book - because it doesn't really develop an argument in any order, the way that, say, the book of Romans might do, or the book of Ephesians. John tends, as he goes through these five chapters, to repeat prominent themes that are in his mind and heart. Every time he repeats a theme, he tends to add a little bit more to it in repetition. If you look at the slide up here on the screen, it just gives you an idea - it's out of a commentary - how some men have tried to explain how John develops the themes in the first epistle. They have used the illustration of a spiral staircase, and he has these three main themes: righteousness, love, and truth. As you go through the five chapters you find that you revisit those themes again and again and again, and they're actually three cycles in the book, but each time he revisits them he tells you something that he hasn't told you before.

Peter Barnes in his well-known commentary on the Bible on this little book, he relates a story personal to his own family where he, at the breakfast table with his wife and children, was reading through this little epistle and sharing some thoughts. During one of the readings his eight-year-old daughter interrupted, and said: 'We've read that before' - we've read that before! He hadn't read it before, but sometimes we feel like that if you have read the first epistle of John, because he keeps repeating the same themes over again and again, the same truths. Why does he do that? Well, here is an old man at the end of his life, and he's coming and bringing perhaps the final message that he's going to bring to the church and going to be
able to do in his lifetime, and these three themes that we'll share with you later, he feels are the most important things - so he just repeats them again and again and again, because they're worthy of repetition.

A bit of advice that was once given by a preacher, an old one to a young one, was: 'Say something, and then say what you've said, and then say it again' - say something, say what you've said, and then say it again. It's like hammering a nail into the wood over and over again. That's what this little letter is like. But I ask you the question: what must it have been like to have been in the church where John was a pastor, or he was an elder? What would it have been like to have worshipped in the Ephesian church, where John resided until he died and was buried there? Because, in the same way in this letter John keeps repeating the same truths, it seems that that's what he did in the little church at Ephesus. In fact Jerome, an early Christian, says that when the aged apostle was so weak that he could no longer preach, he used to be carried into the congregation at Ephesus, and he used to content himself with just a word of exhortation: 'Little children', he would always say, 'Love one another'. 'Little children, love one another', and when the hearers grew tired of the same message over and over again, they asked him why he so frequently repeated it. He responded: 'Because it is the Lord's command, and if that is all that you do it is enough!'. Little children, love one another!

This is not the onset of dementia in this old man of God, but John was commenting, inspired by the Spirit of the Living God, on the need of the hour - what these Christians in Ephesus needed most! He also comments on how these Christians could equip themselves to meet that need. So we must not grow weary, ourselves, in reading this epistle, of repetition within it - but neither, here's the application for us today, should we ever become weary with repeating the same message from God's word, whatever that message may be. Because God's word is the message that our generation urgently needs to hear, just like John's! The gospel, though we repeat it over again and again, and to some it might seem not to bear any fruit, that is the message that our hour cries for.

So what was the message that John brought to Ephesus? Well, let us look first of all at the primary reason for his writing, and then we'll be able to make more sense of what he actually goes on to teach them. I believe the primary reason for his writing is found in chapter 5 and verse 13, one of the key verses of the epistle, if you turn to it with me. John says: 'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God'. This is why he is writing, that those who have believed in the Son of God may know that they have eternal life. Now if you would turn back with me to John chapter 20, we see there the reason for his writing of the Gospel of John. John 20, and in verse 30 we read that he could have written many other things, 'Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written', the things that I have written, 'that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name'.

So we see the distinction here. When John writes his gospel, he is writing to a people who as yet are not converted. He is trying to lead them to faith in Christ. But when he comes to his epistle, as chapter 5 and verse 13 tells us, he is talking to a people who have come to faith in Christ, but he's trying to lead them all into a deeper understanding and a further maturity in their life. In fact, as you go through this little epistle, you'll find the word 'know' over again and again and again and again. That little word infers to us that there was something that these Christians in Ephesus didn't know. Yes, they had believed in the Son of God, they were
saved, but John is writing that they might know that they have eternal life. In other words, there seems to have been a lack of assurance in their salvation.

Now there are two Greek words for 'know' in this little epistle, and they're repeated about 38 times through 1, 2 and 3 John. Now you might say, and it would be a worthy question: why were they doubting their salvation? Why had they a lack of assurance? Well, if you turn to chapter 2 for a moment, and verse 19, we are given a hint as to the reason. Verse 18 says: 'Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us'. Now here we have a clue to the reason why some believers in Ephesus had a lack of assurance. It appears within this little church that an intellectual or a spiritual elite had arisen, and this little group of so-called Christians were claiming that they had some superior anointing from God. They were super-Christians, and they had a supernatural knowledge - that's the key word, a 'knowledge' - that just run-of-the-mill, five-eight, ordinary, nominal Christians didn't have. You could call it a special revelation from God that was unique to them, but this is the point: they were claiming to have discovered an improvement on what had been previously taught in the New Testament church. They had discovered something new.

Eventually this little group of 'elite' broke away, they caused a schism in the church in Ephesus. Consequently there's this little band of simple believers that maybe weren't the most intellectual among them, maybe weren't the most gifted, but they are left there on their own. That little flock of sheep, perhaps, is confused, bewildered, saying to themselves and one another: 'What's this all about? Is there something special about the people that have left us? Are they better Christians than we are? Is there something in their supernatural knowledge that we don't have? Have we really got the truth? Is the message we have believed the gospel, or is our truth and our salvation deficient? Is there something that we are missing?'. Perhaps they even went as far, and I believe they did, as to say: 'Are we really saved?'.

So their assurance was at a low ebb. Assurance is extremely important for the Christian, and if we glean anything from our studies of 1 John, it surely will be that. Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones said on one occasion: 'Assurance is not essential to salvation, but it is essential to the joy of salvation'. You see, you could be saved and not have assurance, many people are. You could have assurance and not be saved, and many people are that too. But the best position to be in, and the biblical position that we all should strive after, is to know that we are saved and have the assurance of it that brings the joy that can only come through that certainty.

So John wrote to these disciples who had already believed, that they should know for sure that they possessed eternal life. Of course in chapter 1 and verse 4, he tells us: 'These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full', as a consequence of your assurance. So John writes to them in a world of doctrinal, social, and moral confusion, and tells them they need assurance to survive. Increasingly, as we go through this little epistle, we will see the relevance of it to our own contemporary age, but particularly regarding the issue of assurance and certainty, we need to expose the truth of 1 John - because we live in a world, even in a Christian church, sadly to say, that is relativistic. In other words, they believe that everything is relative, even truth - that there are no longer any absolutes, no longer any right and wrong, black and white. We live in a society that is not necessarily immoral, though it is that, but it is amoral, there are no morals whatsoever! There is no truth, you have your truth, I have my personal respective truth, but no one can say that this is 'the truth'.
What we have within 1 John is a message for today, if ever there was, and it’s this - John says: 'There are certainties, you can be certain, you can know'. If this book tells us anything, it tells us the fundamentals of the faith, and it encourages and exhorts us, calls us back to the basics of biblical Christianity. You can be sure, John says. What he does for us in this epistle, and for these early believers, is that he gives us three main tests how we can know that we are truly Christians. This is something that we can apply personally to our own lives, and it is something that we can apply across the board to Christendom at large to know those that are really the Lord’s people.

Let me say, before we look at those three main tests, that there is no hesitation in the apostle’s mind - the first thing he does for us is to declare categorically that a Christian can know the certainties of the gospel and the certainties of personal salvation. Throughout this book, over and over again, let me just give you an example at the end, if you turn to chapter 5, the last couple of verses, in verse 18 he says 'We know' - there it is, you could circle every 'know' in this book - 'We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not', and again, 'we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life'. This is John’s point: ‘You Ephesian believers lack confidence, but knowledge breeds confidence. I am here to tell you, as the last living apostle who encount

Can I ask you, before we launch into these three tests of assurance, are you sure of your personal salvation? Do you know you're saved? Are you convinced of the Lord Jesus Christ, who He is, what He accomplished in His death, His burial, His resurrection, the truth of the gospel - by grace, through faith, not of works? Have you received it, embracing the offer of the gospel? Well, maybe you don't know, maybe you're in the same camp as these Ephesians? Well, here are the three tests. Put very simply, and it's been summed up by others in this way, there is first of all a doctrinal test. Then secondly there is a moral test. Thirdly there is a social test. Now we shall explore these, giving the reasons why they were crucial, and still are crucial to ascertain our own personal assurance.

Let's look first of all at the doctrinal test. Now this breakaway group that I spoke of, they had a name - they may not have been given that name actually in John's day, but a little bit later they came to be known as the 'Docetists'. The Docetists really were an early form of Gnosticism, you might be a bit more familiar with that word - but maybe you're not. Let me explain it: the word 'Docetist' comes from the Greek word 'Doceo' (sp?), which means 'I think', 'I seem', or 'I appear'. They taught, concerning the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, that Christ, as He came to earth, only appeared to be a man. He only looked like a man and seemed to be a man, but he was not truly human or physical. Now the Gnostics later developed this in the second century and had some similar views. 'Gnostic', the word comes from the Greek word 'gnosis', which incidentally means 'knowledge'. They believed that they had a special superior knowledge to other people who called themselves Christians. The Gnostics taught, along with some of the Docetists, that it was at the baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He went into the waters and the dove came down, that the Spirit of Christ, the Christ-spirit descended on the man Jesus, and that same Christ-spirit, they taught, left Him before His crucifixion.
Now think of the implications of that for a moment, that means there was no real incarnation of the Saviour. When John tells us in chapter 1 of his gospel, verse 14, that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' - well, He didn't. When Colossians speaks of the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Christ bodily, well, that is wrong - and of course both John and Paul in Colossians were writing against Docetism and Gnosticism in this sense. It's a form of dualism, that means this: that they reckoned that material things in the universe were evil, everything that you could see and touch, even your very flesh and body was evil; the only thing that was good is the spiritual realm and the spirit of man. Therefore it was unthinkable to them that Christ should take upon Himself a physical body, flesh, because that would be intrinsically evil. Do you know what that means? It means that whenever you see Christ in the Gospels eating and drinking, and growing weary, and sleeping in the bottom of the boat, He is acting! It is all a facade, because He wasn't a real man! But here is a fatal implication of this doctrine: when He went to the cross, and the Christ-spirit ascended from Him back to God, it was not the Son of God who died there! Christ, God's Son, did not die on the cross, and He did not die as a substitute for sinners, and we are all lost!

There are many implications to this heresy, but the bottom line that John is highlighting here is that the Docetists did not think rightly of Christ. This was the doctrinal test: how do you know you're in the faith? How did these Ephesians know whether the group that left them were the correct ones, or whether the truth that they had was the whole truth and nothing but the truth? These Docetists, they preached Christ, they looked and sounded like Christians, but this is John's point, it's Paul's point, it's all the apostles points, it was even Christ's prophetic point: the Christ that they preached was of their own making! The test, doctrinally, is given in chapter 4 and verse 2: 'Hereby', John says, 'know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God'. In other words, anyone confessing that He did not come in the flesh is not of God.

I said to you last evening in the Gospel meeting, and I never tire of repeating it, the most important question that we can ask anyone in the ecclesiastical world or in the ordinary everyday world is: what do you think of Christ? That is the doctrinal test. John Newton put it poetically in verse:

"What think you of Christ? is the test
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of Him'.

We have spent many weeks, fifteen in all, looking at confusing cults and false world faiths - and you will remember, I hope, that if not all of them, at least most of them erred regarding the person of Christ. Everything else fell out of tandem with that false doctrine. Can I say to you this evening that I believe, to an extent, that the early Christian church took this Christological heresy more seriously than many Christians in the church do today. In fact in the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote against one who took this view of Christ, and he said, I quote: 'This one blasphemes my Lord by denying that He ever bore a real human body. In saying that he denies everything about Him'. In fact, in Asia at this particular time, there was a Gnostic teacher contemporary to the apostle John and an opponent of him, called Cerinthus. It is only a legendary story, but nevertheless some of these stories have a lot of weight behind them, the story is told that John one day bathing in the baths in Ephesus noticed that Cerinthus was beginning to descend into the pool. The old man, as he was then, girded himself and ran as fast as he could, lest the roof of the baths would fall in upon him in judgment on Cirenthus.
You see these men of God in the early church, they strongly opposed anything that denigrated Christ - because they saw this doctrine, and all other departures in relation to the person of Christ, as a departure from the historical faith that God had given to them. That's what it is! We need to see it as such today! Wasn't it Jude who said in verse 3 of his little book that we are to 'earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered' - the Greek is 'once and for all delivered to the saints'. It cannot be changed, it cannot be added to or subtracted from. Now, of course, this adaptation of Christianity made the message of the church more acceptable to Greek culture. Philosophers could swallow it better with this spiritual element. Plato was to accept many of these philosophies later on, but the fact of the matter is: John saw it as it was! He saw this false doctrine as destroying the essential nature of the Christian message. For John, the Christian message was not a body of ideas or theological precepts, but it was an historical unalterable fact that was personified in Christ Jesus the Lord. Now have you got that? Christianity is Christ, the Christ of God, the Christ of the Bible.

As James Montgomery Boice put it: 'Gnosticism produced a type of philosophical religion that was divorced from concrete history, for concrete history tells us that Jesus was born as a man in Bethlehem's manger'. He lived as a man among men, whilst He was the Son of God and the Christ of God, He was a man, otherwise He could not have been the Saviour of the world. Now friends, here is a lesson if ever there was one to our modern age, because if we, like these Docetists, try to adapt the Christian message to be acceptable to our modern society, the message itself will eventually become irrelevant when the values and philosophies of society change, as they will and must. Whereas God's message applies to all generations and to all people - now we've got to preach it, and meet people where they're at, but sometimes I hear people say 'We've got to make the Gospel relevant' - the Gospel is relevant! We shouldn't attempt to adapt the message to suit our age, because the Gospel is the very message that people need to conform to, as the revelation of God that will change their lives and change their world.

So John, and I love the way he does this, no wonder he was called one of the 'Sons of Thunder'! In verses 1-3 he says it like it is: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ'. It reminds me of Genesis chapter 1, where God just comes in through Moses and says: 'In the beginning was God'. He states the facts, they are nonnegotiable, he doesn't even attempt to argue them - because, as far as he is concerned, the evidence is too great. We know that God made the world because it's here, and we know that Christ came in human flesh because they saw Him with their eyes, they touched Him with their hands, they heard Him with their ears. He was there!

Can I say to you this evening: the church needs to discover again what it is to preach the old message of the Gospel. I'm not talking about caricatures of the Gospel, sometimes you would think we were going back in time when we look at how we do things and how we say things even in this modern age. But what I am talking about is this: it is the historical Christ, the Christ of the Bible, the Christ of church history that we need to preach - and if we try to modernise Christ, or modernise the Gospel, we divorce it from history. Do you know what you do when you do that? You change its character and you make it another gospel. I love modern songs, and there are certain modern trends in Christianity today that I think are very
welcome, I would have to say. But on the other hand there is a certain trend within Christendom that is trying to divorce itself from all of Christian history up to now, you’d think the Christian church was something that only happened from 1960 or 70 up to now. We are an historic people! We're not rooted in any age, but yet the fact of the matter is: our Christ and our gospel is relevant to every age. But this is the warning: if we do not have the historical Christ of Christianity, we do not have the Christianity of Christ.

C. H. Spurgeon put it well, I can do no better than put it in his words: 'The truth, the old truth that Calvin preached, that Augustine preached, is the truth that I must preach today, or else be false to my conscience and my God. I cannot shape truth, I know of no such thing as pairing off rough edges of a doctrine. John Knox's gospel is my gospel, that which thundered through Scotland must thunder through England again'. Here's the test: is the Christ that you have and believe in the Christ of the Bible? That's the personal test to your salvation: do you believe that He is God the Son, that He also came as a man among men and died as the substitute for sinners? That's the test of Christendom.

The second test is the moral test - these two are shorter if you're worried about the time! The moral test. I need to give you a bit of background regarding Ephesus first of all, that we believe John was writing to - his own church. This was a circular letter around many, but the context of Ephesus gives us an insight into some things that John teaches here. The first thing I want you to notice is that Ephesus was a place that had now become familiar with Christianity. Like our own age, perhaps like Ulster, many believers were now the children of believers, or even the grandchildren of the first believers. You remember the day in the Acts of the Apostles where there was a great thrill and excitement, Paul was preaching the Gospel, challenging the god Diana of the Ephesians. Those who plied their trade in making little images for people to worship in devotion of Diana were up in arms, they were losing in their livelihood. Gone were the days when people would go every day for two years to the school of Tyranus and listen to the apostle Paul exegeting the Holy Scriptures. Now this second, or even third-generation Christianity in Ephesus had lost the glory of their witness, they’d lost their power and their zeal. They were becoming tainted with the world. That's who John is writing to.

Also Ephesus was no longer a place of persecution. No, the enemy now was false doctrine. They were at peace, but yet false doctrine was entering in just as Paul had warned them in Acts chapter 20 and verses 29 to 30. As he left the elders in Ephesus he warned them of ravening wolves that would come into the church and devour them. Thirdly, sin was rampant in the city of Ephesus. The Bible tells us it was a pagan city, wholly given over to idolatry and superstition. There was a whole huge religious industry that was dependent upon the worship of this goddess Diana, and it was centred upon the magnificent temple of Diana. The wealth that was derived from that idolatrous worship not only brought great wealth, but it brought spiritual bankruptcy and gross immorality that we couldn’t even go into this evening. We know from the Acts of the Apostles 19 verse 19, from those who were converted out of Ephesus, that there was sorcery and a lot of the occult and dark arts, because they brought their books and their artistic instruments in spiritism and they burned them after their conversion.

Therefore it should be no surprise that in chapter 1 of this epistle, verse 6, John tells them not to walk in darkness. In chapter 2 and verse 15 he warns them not to love the world nor the things of the world. In chapter 4 and verse 1 he tells them to try every spirit, not to believe every spirit that is manifest. In chapter 5 and verse 21, doesn't he tell them: 'Keep yourself from idols'? What a place Ephesus was! But what I want you to see, fourthly, is that there was
an error concerning Christ that had crept into the church, but that error with Christ was intrinsically linked with an error in their understanding of sin. Their theology of sin was wrong, because the false teachers were maintaining that sin is essentially in the flesh. They didn't believe that Christ could become a human physical being, therefore they reasoned that the physical was sinful and the spirit was the only holy and good thing. But that led them to the view that because the flesh was sinful, and eventually would be destroyed, would never be resurrected again, you could legitimise sin in the flesh - sin as much as you like, because it has no consequence.

So the second test was a moral one. John said in chapter 2 and verses 3-4: 'Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him'. Now this is not sinless perfection that some teach, because in chapter 1 verse 8 he says: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us', and verse 10 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us'. But nevertheless, what he is teaching is that the Christian's obedience is not an option. One writer has put it like this, I think well: 'While we are imperfect there must be a real, habitual, and substantial obedience to God'. Real, habitual, substantial - do you know what that's against? Easy-believism, false profession, 'You can take Christ as your Saviour but not as your Lord'. I'm not getting into a debate tonight, but I'm telling you this much: there's nowhere in this book where God says you can come for justification, but not sanctification - nowhere.

A. A. Hodge put it like this: 'You can no more separate justification from sanctification than you can separate the circulation of the blood from the inhalation of the air. Breathing and circulation are two different things, but you cannot have one without the other. They go together and they constitute one life'. You can't come to God and say: 'I want to be forgiven for all my past sins, but I want to live on in sin. I want to be justified but I don't want to be sanctified. I want Christ's salvation but I don't want Christ's image'. That's not on offer. So this is a test, a moral test. None of us are perfect, none of us are what we should be as Christians, we all feel guilty where we fall short - but is there at least a real, habitual, and substantial obedience to God's commands? That is the second test that will give assurance.

The third, very briefly, is the social test. We've seen the doctrinal, the moral, and now the social in chapter 4 in verses 20 and 21. 'If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also'. In other words John is saying, 'Look, if I claim to be a Christian, and if God is love, and He is love, and I claim to know this God of love, I too must love others'. Is that not what 1 Corinthians 13 is all about? You can have all the gifts of the Spirit you like, you can die at the stake for Christ - but if you have not love... Wasn't it the Lord said in John 13: 'A new commandment I give unto you, love one another'. I sometimes am amused with some of these books in Christian bookshops, you've seen them perhaps. They're called 'The Hard Sayings of Christ Explained' - there are many hard sayings of Christ, but I think there's no harder than this one. This one doesn't seem to be in any of those books: 'Love one another'.

Oh you might have the doctrine test alright - 'Oh I know my p's and my q's doctrinally'. You might not even be affected by worldliness in any shape or form, perhaps that's not a problem for you. But what about this one? You can tick the doctrinal test and the moral test, what about the social test? Do you love your brother? Or is there a brother or sister that you hate? Can I say to you tonight: it is very doubtful, if there's hate in your heart for a brother, that you're saved. Luther put it like this: 'It is not Christ walking on the sea, but His ordinary walk
that we are called on here to imitate’. Oh the gifts are wonderful, the power is wonderful, the charisma that is in this church, the anointing, the knowledge, the doctrine - but what about the walk? I’ll tell you, here is a test that the church needs to apply in Ulster: the bickering, the backbiting that goes on in congregations in our land, the dissension that is among believers today - is there another message that the church needs to hear more than this one? This is the test! It's not about loving your own people in your own church, it's not about loving your own denomination, it's loving Christ's ones - whoever they are!

With John these matters, with this Son of Thunder, they're just black or white - there's no grey areas. It's right or wrong, it's true or false, it's good or evil, it's either salvation or damnation, it's either Christ or Antichrist. There's no middle ground, no neutral ground.

You need the doctrinal test, the moral test, the social test - and then you can have assurance! What relevance has this little epistle to our modern day? Have you not seen it already? It has something to say to those in our world that are unsure about spiritual things - they are floating from one religion and one cult to another. But it also has something to say to Christians who have falsely professed faith, and who feel secure when they shouldn't be secure. It has something to say to Christians who are insecure and have no reason to be such. It's telling us this: you can know that you're saved, and here's how you can know! It has something to tell us about Christian ethics, the debates that go on about how a Christian should live in an ungodly age - and sometimes it seems to change from age to age with fashion, how Christian should live. The question we ask here is: does it change in the eyes of God? John says 'No'. Then there's so much charismatic phenomena around today, people are claiming special anointings and knowledge and revelation - and they make a lot of believers, simple souls, feel second-class citizens because they haven't got that. It says: 'Ye have an anointing from God'. Then it has something to say to all of us who think that we have all the truth and got it all correct, yet how often we betray an absence of true agape love, and betray the fact that all we really have is an empty, bitter orthodoxy.

That is why these things were written. God willing next week we'll look in more detail at these first number of verses. Do go home, it's only five chapters long, and read it through for next week a number of times to familiarise yourself with the content. Can I ask you all to search your hearts, just now before God, the doctrinal test, the moral test, the social test - how do you fare, honestly? Is your assurance founded well on solid ground? Or should it be a little shakier than it is? Are you not saved tonight, and you know it deep in your heart? It's time you were. Maybe there wasn't true repentance there in the beginning, and that's why you've got the problems now that you have. Well, set it right this evening.

Father, we give thanks for a wonderful Saviour. We thank You for a Saviour who, just as the children partake of flesh, He likewise partook of the same; that He might die, defeating him who brought death upon this whole race, even the devil. Lord, where would we be if He hadn't become a man, if He hadn't lived as a man among men? We wouldn't have a High Priest to bring us to God. We wouldn't have One in the glory with prints on His hands, His feet, and His side - but we have. We need no other argument, we're on solid ground tonight. But Lord, for those who aren't, oh Lord, search their hearts, what they think of Christ, what fruit is in their lives, how they behave to others - even if they call themselves Christians. Let us all be a people who have this mark: 'Behold, how they love one another'. Take us to our homes in safety, with the fragrance of Christ in our soul, Amen.
Now I want you to turn with me to the book of 1 John. I would encourage you, if you haven't been at our introductory evening, that you would get the tape recording tonight - you can get it on CD or on audio cassette - it just gives you...I spent the whole night giving a background to the theme and the context of such a book like this. I'll not be going over all of that ground tonight, so it's important that you get that knowledge, though I will be touching on some of the relevant information. But you'll be glad to know that we haven't dealt with any of the verses in any depth, and so we're looking at the first four verses specifically this evening from chapter 1 under the title 'Authentic Christianity' - authentic Christianity.

Verse 1 - do note that there is no normal introduction that is given to a New Testament epistle or letter, John just cuts to the chase and gets right to the point: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full'.

The reason why John wrote this epistle, as we saw in our introductory week, is found in the last chapter and verse 13 - let's just remind ourselves of that: 'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God'. Now we were recapping that in John's gospel he wrote that particular narrative of the life of the Lord Jesus in order that people should believe in the Son of God. But now, as he comes to his first epistle, he is writing to those who have believed in the Son of God, but he is giving them an assurance - because, for a reason which we will touch on again this evening, they lacked assurance. Though they had trusted in Christ, they had not that particular assurance that every child of God should seek that brings joy, that brings the satisfaction, the reassurance of the faith of Jesus Christ.

Now why was it that they lacked such assurance? Well, we found out in our first week that there was a sect within the church at Ephesus who considered themselves as an intellectual and spiritual elite. They were, in fact, claiming superior anointing from the Spirit of God, they believed that they had a knowledge and a revelation from God that was almost an improvement on the gospel message that had been revealed to the apostles and passed down through the church to this stage in its history. We have a hint in chapter 2 and verse 19 that this sect broke away, they caused schism within the church in Ephesus. So there's a group of believers that John is writing to - and of course this is a circular letter, but I believe that primarily it was written out of the situation in Ephesus - those who were left behind after this split, those who were confused, shaken, made uncertain because of those who said: 'We have an anointing that you don't have, we have a knowledge and a revelation that you don't have!';
and they were starting, perhaps, to ask themselves 'Well, what if they're right? What if there's something in this anointing and knowledge that they have that we don't?'.

So John comes, and if this epistle teaches anything, it teaches Christian certainties. He gives the certainty that these Christians, because they had believed in the Son of God, could know that they have eternal life. In order to bolster their assurance, we saw in our introductory week that he gave them three litmus tests - how they could know that they were the children of God. The first was the doctrinal test, which specifically we'll take up tonight in most of our time, which related primarily to our view of who the Lord Jesus Christ is. That is the test of Christian authenticity. Then the second test was moral, and we find this right throughout this book, and we'll spend much time on this, that you can't call yourself a Christian - even if you believe correct doctrine - and not live a sanctified and holy life. Then the third test was social, because a holy life is not just all about you and how you live, but it's also entails how you react and relate towards others - particularly your brethren and sisters in Christ, and even those outside in the world. So there was a social test as well as a moral and a doctrinal one.

As I said, the first four verses of chapter 1 really comprise of this doctrinal test, part of it, that we will find within this epistle. You remember that I told you in our first week of introduction that the group that broke away from this church in Ephesus most likely were a group called the Docetists. It was an early form of Gnosticism. Basically they believed that the Lord Jesus just appeared to be a man, He was not really human flesh and blood like you and me, but He only appeared to be such in a sort of phantom or ghostlike manner - He wasn't truly human, so therefore there is no doctrine of the incarnation any more according to these Docetists and Gnostics. That has great ramifications. It means that when the Lord Jesus lived His life before men on this earth, He was really playacting, He wasn't a genuine man. He didn't hunger, He didn't thirst, He wasn't tired, He wasn't really tempted in a human sense. The Word, therefore, did not become flesh, as John says in chapter 1 of his gospel and verse 14, and tabernacle among us. It contradicts directly the teaching of Colossians 2 and verse 9, that the fullness of the Godhead dwells completely, bodily in our Lord Jesus Christ. But here was the fundamental problem in relation to our salvation: obviously incarnation. If He wasn't incarnate He could not go to the cross, and there's a problem regarding salvation and substitution. If He didn't become a man, He couldn't become man's substitute, a sacrifice for all mankind on behalf of man and before God. So this doctrine of the Docetists and the Gnostics had fundamental ramifications for Christian doctrine. They did not think rightly of Christ, and so the whole of Christian faith was at stake. They had created a Christ of their own making.

This is why John was so strongly and vehemently opposed to the teaching of these false teachers and false prophets. Because, as far as he was concerned, and remember he is inspired by the Holy Spirit, this was a complete departure from historical Christian faith. You remember that verse in Jude, verse 3, where he encouraged them to earnestly contend - or defend - for the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints...a completed faith that does not need to be added to, and certainly should not be taken away from. Now this is terribly important: we live today, in the 21st century, in a culture that is eager for religious experience. I think that in our post-modern age we have evolved out of a sceptical society, to a large extent - there aren't as many atheists or agnostics about today, but there are a lot of people around who are yearning for a particular religious experience, and it doesn't have to be Christian necessarily. You see it in the New Age movement, you see it in ecumenism: it doesn't really matter the particular religious label that you take, as long as it seems to work for you! It is a religious pragmatism, it throws out the idea of truth, right and wrong, and accepts that, 'As long as it does something for me, gives me a buzz, gets me to my desired end and goal - well, I'll embrace it, it doesn't really matter whether it's the truth or not'.


1ST, 2ND AND 3RD JOHN

Pastor David Legge

Let me illustrate this to you: George Barna, in one of his polls in the United States, and I take it from there because not only is it one of the greatest 'Christian' countries in the world, so-called, but it's the only one I could really get my hands on figures for. The Barna poll reports that in the US over 80% of people believe in God or gods. It is not an atheistic country by any means. When the folk were asked in this poll in the States if all of the world's religions essentially prayed to the same God, 64% of the adults said 'Yes, they did'. The next statistic is staggering, because the figure among evangelicals in the United States that said everyone prays to the same God was 46%. Among those who labelled themselves as 'born again', as opposed to 'evangelical' - you can make the distinction as you like there! - 48% said that they all prayed to the same God. Among the regular church attendees that may not have considered themselves evangelical, 62% within American churches believed that everyone in the world, whatever religion they belonged to, prayed to the same God in heaven. That means that within the pews of America, two thirds of churchgoing people believed that the exclusive character of the Christian message was now obsolete! Indeed, with those who call themselves evangelicals, half of them believed the same.

So the question needs to be asked today, as it was asked in John's day, in the light of so much confusion: what are the essentials of Christian doctrine? What makes you a Christian? What makes a church Christian? Not only what are the essentials of doctrine, but what are the essentials of fellowship? How can we join with other people? On what grounds? Now, especially in the light of ecumenism, one commentator who I'll share some excerpts from this evening shares the dangers that he encountered in interfaith fellowship. He was there, he fellowshipped with other religions on a low-key level, not, perhaps, to the extent of the fellowship that we would have tonight, but he operated and cooperated with them in various ways, even if it was on a social level. He says this, and I quote him: 'Trying to build unity, particularly for commendable social programs, I recall attending one such attempt in Illinois. This was a meeting of Jewish rabbis and Christian pastors who, for the sake of Chicago's northern suburbs, agreed that a united front was needed against crime and drugs. As the discussion progressed, all sides pressed for' - he quotes - 'common theological denominators' that would be the basis of prayer and worship and ethics. It goes without saying', he says, 'that the Christological emphasis had to be set aside'. Christ, that's what Christological means, the study and understanding of Christ had to be set aside.

Now this writer also expresses how at one stage in his life he was a navy chaplain in the United States Navy. He says from one experience in that career, I quote: 'I recall leading a prayer at an Officer's School near the Navy War College in Newport, Rhode Island. I was reminded gently by the commanding officer not to include anything offensive, such as any reference to Jesus Christ'. He says: 'Imagine wearing a cross on your collar device in the military, and not referring to Jesus'. Now whether we care to admit it or not today, that is the attitude of the world, largely speaking a religious world, and it is even an attitude that is starting to invade the church - a pragmatism. In fact, the same writer goes on to say of a specifically Christian situation in a broad sense: 'A friend of mine once told a story about Harvard Divinity School', which hundreds of years ago used to be a very reputable Divinity School, 'upon learning that one of her professors was an agnostic, she inquired about the range of theological diversity on the seminary campus. 'Anything goes', came the reply. My friend pursued the point, 'You mean there's no belief or absence of belief that would keep one from being hired to teach theology?'. 'Only one', came the clarification, 'the refusal to endorse women's ordination'. That was the only account on which someone would be refused to be a Professor of Divinity in Harvard Divinity School. It didn't matter what you thought of Christ,
what you thought of the Gospel, all that seemed to matter was what you thought in endorsement of women's ordination!

The same confusion, perhaps not to such an extent, exists among evangelicalism today. The Evangelical Theological Society is an academic fellowship of hundreds of evangelical professors and pastors, and it has only one doctrinal affirmation for every member to sign, and it is the inerrancy of Scripture. The Mormons could write a signature beside the inerrancy of Scripture! That tells you nothing! What John tells us is that there is no Christianity if Christ is not at the centre of it. They, as we, were trying to discern: what are the essentials for Christian identity? Indeed, what are the grounds for Christian unity and Christian fellowship? So he gives us both the historical and the experimental aspects of what Christianity is.

So let's answer that question this evening: what is Christianity? The first answer is found in verse 1, and it is the life that the apostle John and the rest of the apostles encountered: the life encountered. 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life'. What John is giving to us now is the objective, foundational, historical basis for the faith that we have. Something objective is something that you can see, something that you can handle, something that is solid. So he tells us: from the beginning, from the beginning! What a statement! It's very reminiscent of how he began his gospel in chapter 1 and verse 1: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. It's even reminiscent of how the Bible itself begins in Genesis 1 and verse 1: 'In the beginning was God'. What John is seeking to do here is lay down a foundation: this is historical, this faith that we have is founded in the Christ of God who came before the world - and he records the account in John 1. But it's also more than that: it is a faith that is rooted and grounded right back to creation, Genesis 1 verse 1, and this is none other than the pre-existent Christ that we preach. This is the One who was with God before the world was.

This is so important that we maintain and realise that we believe in the pre-existent Christ. The Gnostics did not believe this, the Docetists believed that the Spirit of Christ fell upon Him, the man Jesus, when He was baptised in the Jordan, and it left Him before He was crucified on the cross - but the man Jesus who was born into Bethlehem wasn't really that Christ in and of Himself. But He is! He was the pre-existent Son of God. This is important to realise, that our faith is not just an historic faith, our faith is an eternal faith in the eternal pre-existent Son of God. You see the Mormons would say: 'We believe the Bible, but we believe our Mormon Bible too - it's a new revelation added to the Bible', like the Docetists and the Gnostics. But we have to reply to the Mormons: 'I don't need your new book, for I have a book that gives me the revelation of God from the beginning, and tells me that His complete revelation is perfected in Jesus Christ'. Mary Baker Eddy might say to us: 'Well, you need the book 'Science and Health' to complete your understanding of God and how to get to Him'. Pastor Russell and Judge Rutherford of the Jehovah's Witnesses would say you need the books 'Studies in Scriptures', but we say: 'No, we don't need any of those, because our faith goes back to the beginning - that which God gave at the first, the One who was with God before the world began. Our faith is founded on the pre-existent One!'.

You see, what John is saying here is that the foundation of all true fellowship with God and with any other people is the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and these first two verses are telling us of His eternity. Not only His eternity, but the reality of His incarnation as He came from eternity into time to be our Saviour. He articulates it in such a graphic way by saying: 'We heard Him' - the 'we' being the apostles - 'We saw Him with our eyes, we even handled Him with our hands, this Word of life. We say this because He was not an illusion, He was not
a phantom, He was not a ghost, He was not a figment of our imagination, He was real! He came in flesh and blood as a man. That one who came in flesh and blood was from the beginning', and as verse two says, 'He was with the Father'. Now the Greek phrase there is 'proston patera' (sp?), which means He was in closest face-to-face fellowship with the Father, that fellowship that existed in the eternal mystery of the Godhead. This is God the Son, and He became flesh! What John is telling us is that this is a central tenet of what Christianity is, and if you don't believe in it - either the deity of the Saviour or His humanity - you cannot call yourself a Christian. The life was encountered, it was revealed.

Then secondly, as we look into verse 2, we read: 'For the life was manifested', a favourite word of John's, 'and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us'. The life was manifested. The New Age movement, even the Baha'i Faith, and many of the cults follow the heretic of John's day, Cerinthus, in the view that the divine Christ is a sort of spiritual entity that just came upon the man Jesus at His baptism and left Him before the cross. What they do is, they take away this truth, they take away the truth that this life, this Son of God, this Word of God, this Christ was actually manifested in the flesh. The whole of Christianity stands or falls on that truth - it falls to pieces without it. Christ's teachings mean nothing, they fall to the ground and rot, if he was not the Son of God in human flesh. His miracles mean nothing, they are not signs, they do not point to anything. His death was not for sinners, it did not atone for your sins. His precious blood was worthless, because on the cross He was not the Son of God nor the Christ of God. His resurrection didn't happen, His promises to raise the dead are all empty and futile, and therefore we will not rise from the dead, we will rot too. Our sins cannot be forgiven, and He is not coming to judge the world and bring His own to glory. Everything in Christianity rests on the person of Christ, and who He claimed to be.

May I say, that's where it differentiates greatly and fundamentally with other religions in our world. What I mean by that is: it doesn't really matter who Buddha was, Buddhists follow his teaching. In a sense, it doesn't really matter who Mohammed was to the Moslems, other than the fact that he was a prophet, what matters is his teaching and what he revealed. We could go through all the religions of the world, but Christianity is different because it rests fundamentally on who Christ was, and who He said He was. It rests on the premise of Him being God. Confucius and Buddha and Mohammed never claimed to be God in the flesh, but He did! So Christianity as a faith is more than a conglomerate of ideas, it's more than a philosophy, the greatest miracle of Christianity is Christ, and if we don't have Him we don't have anything!

An anonymous writer put it like this: 'I am glad as a Christian that my knowledge of eternal life is not built on the speculations of philosophers or even theologians, but on the unimpeachable testimony of those who heard, saw, gazed at and handled Him in whom it was incarnate'. What John brings to us in verse 2 is not only was that life encountered, but he had a personal experience of it. This life was experienced, he saw it, he heard it, he handled it - it was manifested, it was revealed. In other words, what John is saying, if you look at this verse, he is saying: 'We are not deceived, we saw Him!'. The word for 'saw' there is literally 'We gazed intently upon Him'. You remember when Peter went in and examined the clothes of the Lord Jesus after He had risen again, the grave clothes? There's a word for 'look' there, and it means he 'examined it', he interrogated those pieces of cloth. This is the same word, he gazed intently upon Christ when He was on the earth. We know that of John, he was the beloved disciple, he was the one who was the last at the cross, he was the one whose head was on His bosom on the night in which He was betrayed, he was the one who intently studied the Lord Jesus Christ. He is saying: 'We know that He was a real man, and His vision,
experientially, has filled our souls'. Do you know what he's saying? 'This is no second-hand religious experience that has been inherited from someone else. This is not something that we just read in a book and have adopted, we know that this is real! This Christ of God is not a phantom, He is not a ghost, He is real!'.

Now let me add to the fact that this life came in the flesh, the incarnation, He was the Son of God, it was encountered and experienced - this book intrinsically develops for us the doctrine of the Trinity. Because we see that it says in verse 2 that this life 'was with the Father' before the world began. You see, if you believe in the doctrine of the Son of God, you must believe in the doctrine of the Father and in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, in chapter 2 of this book, if you'll look at it for a moment, in verse 23 John categorically states: 'Whosoever denies the Son, the same hath not the Father: he that acknowledges the Son hath the Father also', and that is implied. So what we have here is the doctrine of the Trinity. No matter what somersaults exegetically and expositionally you try to do to say that there is no Triune Godhead, how can you explain these words? 'This life was with the Father' - with Him - 'before the world began'. You must, therefore, accept the Trinity to be considered as Christian. Indeed, one teacher of doctrine said this: 'Try to explain the Trinity and you may lose your mind, but try to explain it away and you will lose your soul'. That is what John is saying: the truth of the Father and of the Son are intrinsic to this Christian doctrine, and you must believe in both. No person of the Trinity is expendable in our faith.

This is serious stuff, because not only are there those like the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses who deny that the Lord Jesus was actually God the Son, there are others who believe that He was not God in human flesh like the Docetists and the Gnostics, like the Baha'i and the New Age Movement; but there are the Oneness teachers, and they teach that there is no Father and Spirit except Jesus who manifests Himself in three different ways at three different times. People have been astounded that I have pronounced that this is not a Christian doctrine, neither should churches like that be considered Christian - but this is what John says! I stand foursquare on the word of God.

Some will say: 'Well, are we not at a disadvantage? The apostles saw Him, they heard Him, they touched Him, they handled Him; but we have not'. Don't misunderstand what John is saying here. John is saying that the One that brought us this life, the Author of our faith, He was a physical reality, and the foundation of our faith is a historical fact - but that does not exonerate us from exercising personal faith in Him. Even the apostles who saw Him and heard Him and handled Him, they had to do that to be saved. Indeed, that is what he reveals in this book in chapter 5 and verse 1: 'Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God' - 'whosoever believeth', faith must be exercised. Whilst the apostles were greatly privileged, we do not contradict that fact, as in Matthew 13 the Lord Jesus reminded them, when He said to them: 'But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them'. They were awesomely privileged, and their witness gives the witness to the authenticity of Christian faith today in the 21st-century - but it doesn't at all diminish from our personal experience of faith and salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. As Peter said in chapter 1 of his first epistle and verse 8, 'Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory', because the reality of the physical historical fact of the coming in flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ is attested by the apostles, and is of such authenticity that when we put our faith and trust in it, it will save us effectually.
This life was encountered and it was experienced, and it still can be experienced by us in personal salvation. Can I ask you: have you experienced it? Oh, you might have the doctrines all right up here, that's good, but it's not good enough. Judas had the doctrines, but he never had an encounter with Christ in such a manner where he ventured his all upon Him, and trusted Him and repented of his sins. Have you? Authentic Christianity, you see, is not just an historical base, but it has to have an experiential personal identity with Christ.

Then thirdly, in verses 3 and 4 we have the life expressed. Not just encountered and experienced, but expressed. In verse 3 he says: 'That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ'. 'Declare we unto you' - that's a Christian responsibility! Do you do it? Do you declare your faith? Do you share it with others? But the question begs: what is it to share our faith with others? Well, it is to share, obviously, the truth of who Jesus Christ is - but it's also not just to share the historical, but to share the experiential, to express what He has done for us, the experience of personal salvation in our lives! That's terribly important, because although the apostles are the historical witnesses of the coming of our Lord Jesus in the flesh, we are also witnesses. Of course, to be an apostle you had to witness the resurrection, and all of them did - but we are witnesses. I think I’ve told you this before, perhaps around the Lord’s Table, that Lloyd-Jones on one occasion in his book 'Preachers and Preaching' expressed how a preacher is not to be simply an advocate. An advocate is someone who stands and represents another, and looks for evidence and then presents it, historical evidence. But an advocate, or a lawyer, a barrister has not been there at the events, whereas a witness is the evidence - and that's what an evangelical preacher ought to be! That's what a Christian is: a witness! They're evidence in themselves, and there is a sense in which - though it is not physical - we ourselves have touched and seen and known this Word of life. That's what he means, I believe, in a sense, when he says: 'Our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ'.

The Gnostics wanted to establish a fellowship of intellectually elite pilgrims, but the contrast is of the apostles: they wanted to declare, to proclaim to the world what they had received from God. They were not an elitist club and group, there was nothing hidden about this truth that God had revealed through Christ. This was not a secret knowledge to a select few, this was something that was declared to the world, that all men could believe if they would have faith in the Son of God who came into the world, the whole world! This must be believed, the message that is declared. It is an everyday experience.

So we have looked at the objective, the fact that historically Christ came, John saw Him, touched Him, handled Him, the life was manifest. But now we're coming to the subjective, and these are the evidences of authentic Christianity - both the historical base and the subjective experience. Everyday experience! One writer has said: 'This is a rebuke to much contemporary evangelicalism, which divorces a right theology from a Christ-like life'. The sad fact of the matter is, there are many churches that are Bible-believing today and fundamentalist, and they are evangelical, but they do not know what it is to be like Christ, to live like Christ, to talk like Christ, to love like Christ! Sadly, often they hold truth with great arrogance and pride.

Do you have an everyday experience that is authentic Christianity? A man who receives a letter from an absent friend is probably happy and chuffed to get it, but he will be far happier when he actually meets and enjoys the immediate company of his friend. You can know who He is, the Son of God, the Christ of God, in human flesh for us, and all the doctrines of the atonement and the resurrection and His second coming - but you may have an absence in
your life of fellowship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ; and that is what Christianity is all about.

Can I ask you when the last time was that you had fellowship with the Father and with the Son? This is the subjective experience that authenticates the Christian Gospel. Now he communicates it in two ways. This subjective experience is manifest through first of all fellowship, that's what he says at the end of verse 3: 'our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ'. This word in the Greek language for 'fellowship' is 'koinonia', 'koinonia', it literally means 'to have in common'. It was used in classical Greek language as a favourite expression for the marriage relationship, the most intimate bond between human beings - 'to have in common'. Yet it is used very appropriately here as a description of the fellowship that not only we have with the Father and with the Son, but ultimately the fellowship that will derive from divine fellowship towards others who are in Christ also. Isn't that remarkable? It's one of the deepest expressions of human fellowship that there can be.

Let me say this: here we're getting at the base, not only for what is Christian doctrine and what makes a person an authentic Christian, but we're now seeing the grounds for fellowship and unity within the Christian church - it can only be with those who are authentically Christian, those who hold to the Christian doctrine of who Christ is and what He has done. But what John is saying here is that fellowship with one another is only derived from fellowship with God and fellowship with His Son. In other words, tradition cannot provide a basis for church unity, even common experience cannot provide a basis if it is unrelated and divorced from the historical reality of who Christ was. Sadly today what is so notorious as the grounds for Christian fellowship, and even ecumenical fellowship across all religions, is subjective experience and standards. I'll give you one example: the Roman Catholic Church has its own brand of the charismatic movement that use the same language as evangelicals and have the same experiences. They speak in tongues, they baptise - so-called - in the Holy Spirit, they do all sorts of things - but they're not saved. One or two of them may be, I'm not limiting the grace of God, only God knows those that are His, but the fact of the matter is: when you probe into the meanings behind the evangelical garb that they use, we find that there is classical ancient Roman Catholic theology behind it all.

You see, Christian unity can only be upon the truth of the Scriptures. That can be the only authentic and adequate foundation for fellowship, and we must fellowship on those grounds alone - fellowshipping only with those whose fellowship is with the Father and with the Son, and that means as the Father is portrayed in the Scriptures and as the Son is also. But let me also add to that: that means that we ought not to add to those grounds of fellowship. A man who has fellowship with the Father and with the Son, I can have fellowship with. As the little chorus put it:

'I don't care what church you belong to,  
Just so long as for Calvary you stand.  
If your sins have been washed in the fountain,  
You're my brother, so give me your hand'

That's the Christian fellowship we have here in John. But isn't it remarkable when we think for a moment that as sinners this word 'koinonia' is used toward us, we who have nothing in common with a holy God! We who are the exact antithesis morally and spiritually of all that He is in His divine being - sure we have hardly anything in common, some of us, with each other! But this salvation that we enjoy, this commonality has come because God in His grace has sent Christ into the world to have something in common with us - what was that? His
flesh! Koinonia, fellowship can only be upon this fact: that Christ came in the flesh for us, and in that flesh He went to the cross and bore our sin in that body upon it. Because of that, when we trust in Him, what does Peter say in his epistle? 'We become partakers of the divine nature', the new birth, and we are given the very nature of God. Do you see that word 'partakers' that Peter uses? It is from the same Greek root that is translated 'fellowship', 'koinonia'.

I hear some evangelicals, they say: 'I think the church lacks in fellowship, you know'. So they get a picnic together, or they go for a walk in a forest park, or they go bowling or something like that - not that there's anything wrong with those things, there's not, and it's good for Christians to do recreational things together - but that's not fellowship. Fellowship is something deep, something spiritual. Sure, doesn't God tell us to love our enemies? There's nothing in love or friendship that is spoken of here, this is a deep fellowship with each other and with God upon the knowledge of the Gospel of who the Father is and who the Son is, and what we have together.

Then the second subjective experience that authenticates Christianity is not just fellowship, but joy. In verse 4 we find it: 'And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full'. If fellowship is the answer to spiritual loneliness, joy is the answer to spiritual emptiness. Didn't the Psalmist say in Psalm 16: 'In thy presence is fullness of joy'. Sin has caused unhappiness right throughout all of mankind, indeed in Hebrews 11:25 regarding Moses we see that pleasures only last for a season when they are sinful ones, but God's pleasures are for evermore - at Thy right hand there are pleasures forever! A life that is real, listen to this, a life that is based on the authentic historical facts of Christianity - who Christ was as God's Son, coming in the flesh to us; authenticated by the fellowship among God's people, and daily experiential fellowship with the Father and with the Son - it'll be a life that is permeated by joy. Is that your experience? Maybe that joy is not there, even though you believe everything about Him - that's right, because you're not fellowshipping with Him.

It was old Karl Marx that wrote: 'The first requisite for the people's happiness is the abolition of religion'. The truth of God is: the first and only requisite for the happiness of people is that Word that was with the Father from the beginning, which they heard, which they saw, which they handled with their hands, and which they have declared unto us, and which we have embraced by faith. The fellowship that we enjoy with Him and each other is in that One, and what a joy it brings! Hallelujah! The truth is Christ, He is Christianity, He is our faith!

Our Father, we thank You that our fellowship is with You and with Jesus Christ Your Son, that One who came to this scene veiled in the likeness of our sinful flesh, apart from sin. As the children are partakers of flesh and blood, so He likewise took part of the same that He might
die, and die for us. Thank You, Lord, that He rose again, and He could stand before doubting Thomas and say: 'Thrust your hand into my side, look upon me. Behold, a spirit has not flesh and bones as ye see me have'. He is the human Christ, but then we witness Thomas as he falls at His feet and declares: 'My Lord and my God!'. We know that the Son of God has come, and hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ, this is the true God and eternal life, in whose name we pray, Amen.
Well, let's turn together to John, the first epistle of John, and we're still in the first chapter of course - I think we'll be there for a week or two yet! Maybe this is your first week, I don't know. I'm glad that some of you have been here on previous weeks, it's good to have you back, we hope that you're going to continue coming. Perhaps this is your first week with us, and it would be a help to you I'm sure if you got some of the recordings either on CD or on audio cassette of previous studies, just to put everything into place. We spent some time in our first study looking at the context of this book, and we're not going to repeat and go over that ground again and again every week, so if you want to get the context of all that we're going to say in this book, why not get the first tape, and then it wouldn't do any harm getting the last study which comprised of verses 1 through to 4 of chapter 1, where we looked at the subject of 'Authentic Christianity'. This week we're looking specifically at verses 5 to 7 of chapter 1 under the title 'The Gospel According To Christ'.

We'll begin our reading at verse 1, just to get the flow of what John the apostle is saying to us: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" - and we'll end our reading at verse 7.

Now in the day and age in which we live, you could ask a Protestant or a Roman Catholic clergyman the question: 'What is the Gospel?', and you may get a plethora of different and even contradicting answers. Often the answer that is given is a nebulous one, an unspecific one. Sometimes the answer is given that the Gospel is simply the body of the record concerning the life and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, but it doesn't go any further than that and specify what the Gospel is in exact terms. Often you don't get any more out of a specific answer than just: 'Well, it's to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself' - and I don't know how many sermons and funeral homilies I've heard broadcast over the radio and over the television where a priest or a Protestant clergyman is saying just that, that the Gospel is to love, to love God, to love your neighbour.

I would have to say, in this day and age in which we live, modern evangelicals aren't much different in their understanding of what the Gospel is. I dare you to take this experiment, and set someone down - and beware because they might do the same to you, be prepared for it! - and ask them: 'What is the Gospel?'. Recently I took a series of meetings in Portrush with the CPA on conversions in the Acts of the Apostles, and one of the reasons I said I was doing it was because I'm a bit perturbed at how little understanding there is, especially among young
people today in Christian circles, regarding what true conversion is. Sometimes the answer that comes back, even from evangelical folk is: 'Well, it's to know God, it's to know Christ, it's to have a relationship with God'. But if you leave it there in that sort of airy-fairy mamby-pamby undefined language, we are in real trouble! Surely there's nothing more important than what the Gospel is? Therefore we must be certain what it is, because the Gospel is a life or death matter, in fact eternity - your eternal soul and its destiny - depends on the Gospel.

Indeed, that's what the apostle Paul said, wasn't it, to the Galatians in chapter 1 of his epistle, verse 8: 'But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed'. If you preach or believe a false gospel, the inevitable outcome is: you will be damned, you will be cursed! So it's important that the believers who John was writing to in the church at Ephesus, and in the other churches that were being affected by false teachers, would be certain about what the true Gospel was. They had become uncertain because a new Gospel had been introduced into these churches by these false teachers. We saw that they were called Docetists, they were forerunners to the early Gnostics, but basically they were teaching that God had come to them as the chosen few and revealed a new revelation to them that was different and had additions to the original Gospel that was given by Jesus to the apostles.

Now if ever you were looking for the certainty of what the true Gospel is, well 1 John is a good book to go to, because it's a book that is filled with certainties. What better could the apostle John do to stop all the debate of what the Gospel is, than by telling them the Gospel according to Christ. That's exactly what he does here in verses 5 to 7, what he's saying is: 'We', speaking of the apostles, 'We are only communicating to you what Christ told us from God. The message we declare to you, Christ gave to us, and we are only relaying what He told us'. In John chapter 8, of course, the Saviour said: 'I speak that which I have seen with my Father'. So there is this chain of communication: God the Father communicates to Christ what He wants men to know; Christ comes and instructs the twelve, and the twelve are instructed to go into all the world and preach this Gospel; and now John comes and refutes any false gospel claims by saying, 'All that we are giving to you is the Gospel according to Christ'.

Of course, John is not the only apostle that concurs with that view. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, if you care to turn to it with me, in the first four verses Paul the apostle says exactly the same thing. He's going to go into an exposition of the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ and our subsequent prospective resurrection - incidentally, the backdrop of heresy was quite similar to the Docetists and the Gnostics of 1 John. In 1 Corinthians 15, look at the first four verses: 'Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved' - this is the message which I preached first of all, it's the message that was effective to you and saved your soul, 'keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures'.

Paul put it another way in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, that he would have nothing known among them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That was the Gospel they heard from His lips, they saw through His death, they witnessed in His resurrection, and they were instructed by Him to preach. You see, what he has been telling us in the first four verses of 1 John is that the authentic Christian message is that of the historical Christ, who came in the flesh, who they saw, who they touched, who they heard, and from whom they received this
great Gospel message, passed to them as apostles, and now they have passed it on to us, the church, through the apostles' doctrine which is the holy Scriptures. You hear what John is saying, hear it loud and clear: the Gospel, the message that we declare unto you, is the Gospel according to Jesus Christ. What is that message? Well, we're going to see tonight: it's a simple message, how sinful men can have fellowship with God through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let me ask you, just before we launch into an understanding of this Gospel according to Christ: why would you ever need an additional revelation, an apocryphal writing, a new prophet, when you have a Gospel like this one from the very lips of Christ? We don't need Joseph Smith, we don't need Mary Baker Eddy, we don't need Brigham Young, we don't need any of these new prophets, we don't need any of their holy - so-called - writings; for God hath, in these last days, spoken unto us by His Son. The reason why Christ is able to save to the uttermost all who believe in Him is because He ever lives to make intercession, He has an unchangeable priesthood, Hebrews 7 says. That word 'unchangeable' means literally 'a nontransferable priesthood' - there's no one qualified like Him! There's no one who has satisfied the justice and the righteousness, judicious wrath of a holy God for mankind like Christ. The message of His death, His burial, and His resurrection is, as Jude says in verse 3, 'the faith once and for all delivered to the saints' - full stop, no addition, no subtraction.

How, after such a declaration like that, could you possibly add extra-biblical accounts, or claim to have secret knowledge other than what has been revealed through the Lord Jesus? The whole of the New Testament declares that as an utter impossibility. Romans 1 and verse 1, if ever there was an understanding of the Gospel needed today it's in the exposition of the book of Romans, right there at the very beginning Paul declares that he's going to expound the Gospel of God. Of course, he tells us that it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. Indeed in Galatians 1, where we've read from already, Paul says: 'I neither received this message from man, neither was I taught it by a man, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ' - God has revealed Himself in His Son, and you can't improve on that!

Christians, you need to beware, because through the 'God Channel' and through cheap Christian paperbacks today there is a false doctrine of revelation coming into the church that is deceiving many. It would almost need that we double up, or triple, or quadruple the pages of this book to have all the new revelations that men are having revealed to them today! A lot of it, all of it in fact, if it adds to and contradicts Scripture, is false! We have a perfect revelation in the Lord Jesus Christ, and we can't improve on Him. That's what we have, can I ask you tonight: Do you have it? Maybe you're here and you belong to a cult, or you belong to a false religion, and maybe you think I'm being far-fetched saying that - but we have from time to time folk who do frequent the building who belong to Jehovah’s Witnesses or to Mormons or to other sects. I'm asking you this evening: is this the message that you have had declared unto you? Christ and Christ alone! Christ who is the Son of God, Christ who is the substitute for sinners; and if you embrace Him by faith alone you shall be saved.

Well, to be certain whether or not you do have this message, and that the Ephesians had this message, John gives an outline of what this message was that was declared to the apostles by Christ. Like every good evangelical preacher he has three points! I don't always have three, but I'm not always good! So I'm going to share the three with you this evening, and the first - very simply divided out through this chapter - first of all he tells us: God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Now, as a Christian, you're going to learn this evening the nuggets, the tenets of fundamental truth in the Gospel. If you're a preacher this will be a
good exercise for you, because right away what the apostle John is telling us is that the Gospel must always start with God. Genesis 1 verse 1 starts with God. John, in his gospel, starts with God. Now he's telling us: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life', the One who was with the Father before the world was - we are preaching the message of the Godhead in the Gospel. The Gospel starts with God.

But of course, the big question today in our world is: who is God? What is God? The fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the same question: What is God? I'm not going to test any of you good Presbyterians here tonight to see if you know the answer, but that is a question that our century and every century has been puzzled with. Men have stretched their intellect to know 'Who is God? What is He? What is He like?'. Today in our individualistic and relativistic age, people are saying: 'Well, God, for me, is this... and God, for you, can be that...' - and there's such a confusion over who and what God is. It's as if God is a chameleon character, who just morphs into a myriad of people's individual preferences. God can be what you like Him to be, and what I like Him to be at the same time - that is an utter reasonable and rational impossibility!

The Shorter Catechism does say, very prolifically and profoundly: 'God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth' - and we can say 'Amen' to that. But what John is talking about here is not knowing about God, he speaks to us about experience, and he's telling us that it's not all about knowing about Him, it's about knowing Him personally and intimately. This is what he experienced, the message that he had declared to him was experiential through an actual personal encounter with Jesus Christ. No other writer tells us as much about God as John does. He tells us 'God is spirit' in John 4:24, that is in his gospel. In chapter 1 verse 5 here we see 'God is light'; chapter 4 of this epistle and verse 8 'God is love'. But please beware, because John is not wanting to just give us knowledge concerning the Almighty, but he is wanting the goal of fellowship for all. Look at verse 3 of chapter 1: 'That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ'. It's an intimate, personal, experiential knowledge that John desires for us.

But let us not miss the point: how is it that God chooses to reveal Himself initially through the message that He has given to mankind, with the goal of fellowship in mind, but how does He come to men first and foremost? Please note: He does not come as a God of love. While He is a God of love, and that is one of His dearest attributes to all sinners who have been saved by grace, that is not how He reveals Himself to man initially. Rather, He shows Himself as light. You can go back to John's gospel in chapter 1, and the theme is the same there. In fact, even in the beginning in Genesis chapter 1, God speaks and there is light. Here in 1 John chapter 1 and verse 5 there is this declaration before love is mentioned: God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. That word 'darkness' is in the emphatic double negative, which means there is no darkness whatsoever in Him.

Now I am not going to even attempt to expound what it means for God to be light. One scholar has put it well in a one line definition that sums it all up for us. He says: 'Light physically represents glory. Intellectually it represents truth. Morally it represents holiness'. So physically, if we can talk about God even in those terms, for God to be light speaks of His glory, His blinding majesty. Then to speak of light intellectually speaks of His truth, His wisdom, His precepts, His counsel, His word. To speak of light morally speaks of His holiness, His purity. Job could say that even the heavens were unclean to the Lord. Even the lips of the
ST, 2ND AND 3RD JOHN

prophet Isaiah were unclean to the Lord. Even His own people are unclean. Habakkuk 1 and verse 13 says that the Lord is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, He cannot look upon sin. Paul said to Timothy that God, who is the only one with immortality, dwells in light which no man can approach unto.

'In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days'

So the first theme of Christ's message, the message that the apostles received from Christ, the message that they passed down to the early church, the message that we ought to receive today is first of all: the message of the holiness of God, and therefore man's separation from God because of his sinfulness. Now let me sum that all up in this statement: the first theme of his message is that man lacks fellowship with the holy God of heaven. Now, if we need anything in these days, we need a fresh vision of the holiness of God. F. W. Faber is a hymn writer and poet whom I love greatly, and one of his greatest hymns I believe is: 'My God How Wonderful Thou Art'. Listen to two of the verses:

'My God, how wonderful Thou art,
Thy majesty how bright,
How beautiful Thy mercy seat,
In depths of burning light!

How wonderful, how beautiful,
The sight of Thee must be,
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power,
And awful purity!'

Oh, that we would get a vision of the Almighty like that, in all of His light, in His glory, in His moral perfections, in His holiness and purity! But of course, Genesis 3 tells us that man is out of fellowship with God, man has been cut off by original sin - our father and mother in the Garden of Eden - and even practically today, as Isaiah 59 tells us, it is our sins and our iniquities that separate between us and our God. Our sins have hid His face from us, like a cloud coming between earth and the sun, it's blocking the light - the light is not getting in!

So what we are seeing here is that John is telling us that an understanding of the separation that sin has caused between humanity and God is intrinsic to the preaching of the true gospel. 'Why?', you say, 'Why can't you just come in there right away and tell them that God loves them?'. Now you must do that, but if you don't talk to them of God's holiness, if you don't speak to them of sin and how men personally have broken God's law - do you know what you do? You cheapen the love of God! 'How is that so?', you say. Simply because you cannot understand the greatness of God's love until you understand both His holiness, His awesome holiness, and the magnitude of your personal iniquity. If you go to a jewellers and you look through the front window, and you see there beautiful diamond rings. But you know those diamond rings are being offset by a black backdrop of black velvet, black as the coal that the diamonds came from. It is that black backdrop that offsets the diamond, that causes the light to shine through it, to see its splendour, to see its glory - it's exactly the same with the love of God. You can never appreciate Calvary love until you appreciate the awesome holiness of God and your awful sinfulness!

Do you know what that means? A message that ignores the holiness of God, and a message that fails to preach against sin and declare God's judgemental wrath because of the broken
law of His holiness, is not the message that Christ gave to the early disciples: God is light, in Him is no darkness at all. In some pulpits in our land you dare not even mention sin, judgment, or hell - it's unfashionable, it's not trendy! Well, it's not the message of Christ if you don't preach it!

Well, John's first point is: the message that we declare to you that we received of Him, is that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. Let's look at his second point, for his second point is found in verse 6: 'If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth'. John's second point is simply: fellowship with God cannot be known if we walk in darkness. Because God is light, we must walk in the light, but we cannot claim to walk with God and have fellowship with God if we walk in darkness. Now what you have here in this verse in the 'If we say...' is the first of three denials. The first is found, as we said, in verse 6; the second is found in verse 8: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'. The third is found in verse 10: 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us'.

Now there are three more 'If we say's', but just concentrating on the three in chapter 1 - verse 6 is the suggestion that fellowship can be enjoyed while walking in darkness. There were those false teachers, and maybe some Christians who were starting to believe it in Ephesus, that you could walk in spiritual, moral darkness and still have fellowship with God. John answers this, and he says: 'If you say that and believe that, you're lying, and you're not doing the truth'. Now, it takes on another form a step further in verse 8, because in verse 8 there is the allegation that we have no sin in ourselves - it is the theological assertion that we have no sinful nature, that we are not fallen creatures, that we are essentially good as human beings. In verse 10 there is a further allegation, an assertion that not only are we not sinners by nature, but we have not sinned - we are not sinners by practice. There's a group of people actually claiming here that they never sinned against man or against God! John answers them: 'You're liars, you're not doing the truth, you're deceiving yourselves, the truth isn't in you. You're making God a liar! God's word does not dwell in your heart'.

Now we're only going to deal with the suggestion in verse 6, that fellowship can be enjoyed while walking in darkness. John concludes to them that they are lying, and they are committing untruth. Let me show you how this was witnessed in John's day and in ours in two practical ways. The first is theologically. Theologically what John was trying to bring to their attention was this: that if they walk in darkness, and claim to have light from God, they are potentially opening themselves up to fellowship with others outside the grounds of the Gospel. That's exactly what was happening here. They were following a false Christ, they were imbibing the Greek philosophy of the day that was fashionable intellectually and socially. What Paul said to the Corinthians could be said to some of these Ephesians: 'What fellowship hath light with darkness, and Belial with the Living God? What fellowship hath Christ with temple idols?'.

My friend, here is a lesson for us today theologically: the only grounds on which we can have fellowship with another man or woman in humanity, as brothers and sisters in Christ, is on the foundation of the Gospel. If they deny the fundamentals of the Gospel, they cannot be considered authentically Christian, and they're not proclaiming or declaring the Gospel according to Christ, and we cannot have fellowship with them. Theologically they had to learn that in Ephesus, we need to learn it today. The other side of the coin regarding that truth is that in the one regard we must always fellowship on the grounds of the Gospel, we must never add to it anything else other than the gospel. What was happening here in Ephesus was there was an elitism - it could have been charismatic in the sense that these false teachers
were coming along and saying they had a personal privileged knowledge of God greater than the rest. They were making the other believers second-class citizens. They were believing themselves to be above those Christians, that those Christians were not worthy of their fellowship, so they split off in schism. We have exactly the same thing today: you have people who believe they have come into charismatic gifts, and they're leaving churches and forming other ones, and causing a split in the body of Christ. But equally so, there are those who are so tight that they squeak when they move, and they won't have fellowship with any other believer even though they name the name of Christ, and stand upon the fundamental tenets of the Gospel. We must never fall into either of those errors, because that is walking in darkness.

Secondly this has a practical implication, not just theologically but it was practically seen and evidenced in John's day and in ours. Here is the first way it was seen: people were living in sin and claiming that they had the life of God. Living practically in a lifestyle of habitual sin, yet claiming that they were in fellowship with God. This has been given a theological name: antinomianism. Now don't switch off when you hear these big names, you might learn a thing or two! Deuteronomy is the second giving of the law, 'onomy' means 'law' really. What you have in antinomianism is 'anti-lawism', Christians - so-called - who were saying, 'We can trust Christ and have the life of God, be in fellowship with the brethren and in fellowship with the Father through Christ, yet live a life that is against the law of God, and even in contradiction of it'. That's what was written of in Romans 6 when Paul asked the rhetorical question, hypothetically: 'Should we continue in sin that grace may abound?'. Of course he said: 'God forbid' - but what was coming into vogue here was this dualism of the Gnostics, the Docetists. Now don't get confused, remember they were saying that everything spiritual is pure, and everything physical is evil - so therefore they believed that the body would be burned up in the judgment, and it didn't matter what you did with the body as long as you had eternal life in your soul. So they were committing all sorts of sins through the body.

But John says: 'You cannot have fellowship with God and walk in darkness'. I shared this with you a number of Sunday nights ago, the story of J. P. Mehaffey who was a famous scholar and man of the world from Trinity College in Dublin. When he was asked if he was a Christian, he answered: 'Yes, but not offensively so'. What he meant by that statement was, he didn't let his Christianity interfere with his social life. That is exactly what John's preaching against: you cannot claim to have the life of God and walk in darkness, and live habitually in sin. Indeed, many cults fall into this trap because of their intrinsic fundamental error. In the 1960s, during the sexual revolution, there was a group called the 'Children of God' cult, and they actually taught that people could be won for Christ through sinful means. You may find that staggering, but that is exactly what happened in John the apostle's day - so much so that they declared that you could be a 'hooker' that was a Christian, a Christian hooker and win men for Jesus! That was almost 40-odd years ago, and there's a mentality about today that is quite similar. American gangster Mickey Cohen reputedly had converted to Christ, and then later declared that he wanted to be a 'Christian gangster' - if he had come to me, I could have introduced him to quite a few of them! He might have learned a thing or two! But nevertheless there was this idea that you could live the life of God, yet live a life of sin - and it is impossible. In fact, what John is saying is: if you claim that, the life of God is not in you!

You listen to that carefully tonight, my friend. I don't know where you're living, but what we're talking about here is not just falling into sin now and again - we all do that, and we all try with the Spirit's help not to - but what John's talking about is a lifestyle of habitual sin that marks you out as an habitual sinner, addicted to sin. If you live in sin, you cannot claim the life of God in your soul - that's the Gospel, and we need to herald it out today, because
there's an easy-believism that says: 'Come as you are'. That's the Gospel alright, but it lacks repentance - to come as you are, but be willing to give up your sin, and Christ will enable you to give up your sin. In fact, people are coming to Christ with the one hand, and keeping their sin with the other - and that's not salvation! I hope you haven't believed that one.

Then practically this was manifest in those who were actually claiming perfection and living a lie. They were saying that they had not sinned, that they hadn't within them a sinful nature. John says 'Look, if you're claiming that, if you're actually denying that men are sinners, that they're born sinners, you do not have the truth. You're living a lie'. Now what relevance has this to us today? Well, this is a popular Western philosophy in contemporary thought, largely influenced by Freudian psychology which denies any objective basis for guilt. You shouldn't make people feel guilty from the pulpit, they just learn little things as children - they didn't have a rattle when they were in the pram, so they go out and they joy-ride, or they take drugs, or they rape people. You shouldn't make people guilty, and counsellors and psychologists are all trying to free people from guilt - but they don't realise that the source of guilt is sin! They're denying sin, and by denying sin they're deceiving themselves, and they're making liars of all of us.

So, what John is saying is: a message that preaches that you can be forgiven and live a godless life is not the Gospel of Christ, it's not the one that Christ preached to the apostles. 'Who preaches that today?', you might say. Nominal Christianity preaches it. You can go to mass, you can go to communion, you can think you're saved because you're baptised and you go through the sacraments, and that is the same thing. You live a life that is devoid of the power of God, and the transformation that the salvation of Christ brings in the new birth, and think that you're on your way to heaven - well you're not! You need to be converted! You need to have the life of God in your soul! I'll tell you, evangelicals often live like that. They think because of a profession at an early age, that they can ask Jesus into their heart: 'Come into my heart, come into my heart Lord Jesus, come in today, come in to stay' - do you think He's going to come in to stay, and you'll just say that prayer and live like a reprobate through your teenage years and the rest of your life, and think God's going to open the door of heaven for you? That is a lie! That is not the Gospel that Christ preached. Once you're saved, you're saved forever, but to be saved in the first place there must be that initial repentance.

Are you in darkness tonight, my friend? You cannot walk in darkness and claim to be in fellowship with God! Roy Hession speaks even to Christians in his little book 'The Calvary Road' on this verse, and he says: 'Sin always involves us in being unreal, pretending, duplicity, windowdressing, excusing ourselves and blaming others' - do you know what that means? Staying in the darkness! Trying to hide our sins from God! Could you ever think of anything more idiotic? But maybe it's not just hiding sins from God, maybe it's hiding sins from our brother. In Genesis 3 what you have is the relationship broken down with God and man, but then in Genesis 4 we have the relationship subsequently breaking down between man and his brother, Cain and Abel. It all comes together. Are you hiding something from your brother that you're doing? Something from your wife that you're doing? Something against your children that you're doing? No one knows about it - but God knows, my friend! You cannot claim to walk in the light if you're hiding in the darkness. You might as well, as one man has said, live in a coal pit and claim that you're developing a suntan. It's not possible. 'Be not deceived, the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God', and the gospel that preaches that men are not sinners is not a gospel!
'God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all' is his first point. Secondly, fellowship with God cannot be known if we walk in darkness. Thirdly, in verse 7 we see that fellowship with God, and indeed each other as believers, can only be known if we walk in the light. 'But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin'. Now it follows, logically, that if God is light you cannot have fellowship and hide in sin. Spurgeon said: 'To walk in the light is the willingness to know and be known'. To know what you are as a sinner, to know how you are in the sight of God, and be willing to be known as such, and to humble yourself at the cross. To say, 'Lord', just as Amos 3:3 says, 'Can two walk together except they be agreed? So I agree that I am what I am, and You are what You are, and I confess my sins to You'. Walking in the light is just agreeing with what Jesus says about you, and walking with Him in it. I can't put it any simpler than that. He said in John chapter 8: 'I am the light of the world, he that walks after me, follows me, shall not walk in darkness shall have the light of life'. Do you know what He's saying? 'Follow me! Follow me! Come out of the darkness, come into the light - and when you come into the light, your sin will all be shown up, and I'll put my finger on them. When I pinpoint them, if you admit them and put them under the blood by faith, I'll deliver you from them' - bring it into the light!

Is that what Christ is saying to you tonight, believer? You're dabbling in something that is ungodly and is profane, and is an abomination in God’s sight, and you know that's why the blessing of God is not upon you, nor your marriage, nor your church. It's time, Christ says, to bring it into the light. If you want to be delivered, if you want the light of God to flood your soul, bring it out of the darkness into the light! 'How can I do that?'. Practically, how do you do it? Psalm 119 says: 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path'. If you take the torchlight of God's word and shine it on your soul, God will start showing you those things that are not right. As He shows you them, if you plead the blood of Jesus Christ and confess your sin before Him, He will cleanse you. You see, this is the whole point of what John is saying: God is light, and if you're going to have fellowship with God you've got to walk in the light and live in the light - but that's impossible for a sinner, and you're a liar if you say you're anything but a sinner, but - Hallelujah! - the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanseth us from all sin.

Now you listen to this carefully. Remember the context of 1 John, what he's saying is this - against the Docetists, against the Gnostics - Christ wasn't a ghost, Christ wasn't Jesus upon whom the Christ spirit came at His baptism, but Christ the Son of God came in flesh and blood, and died in flesh and blood, and was buried, and shed His blood for sinners and rose again victorious over the grave, over death and hell. Why? That you should live in the light. I'll tell you, if He didn't come in flesh and blood like they were claiming, you're damned and so am I - but He did! He partook of flesh, just as children do, so that He could die the death of every sinner and defeat him who has the power over death, even the devil.

As we walk in the light, here is the thought, if you seek God's light and seek the Lamb who is the light, the blood will constantly avail for you. It's not really thinking about trying to do a post-mortem of all your sins, because there are some sins that you're ignorant of just at the minute. There are sins that you're unconscious of, sins of omission - and I'm not suggesting you don't look out sins and confess them, but what this is actually saying is this: even the sins that we don't yet know about, if we seek to walk in the light, Christ will cleanse them in His precious blood. That word 'cleanse' is in the present tense, which means 'continuous' - if we seek to walk in the light, He will continuously cleanse us constantly from our sin, Hallelujah! It's not only the guilt of sin that is atoned for in the precious blood of the Saviour, but this is the thought - and I want you to grasp this tonight, you who are bound with some
kind of habitual sin and not converted: in His blood the power of sin is broken! Maybe you haven't got that, but I'll tell you: that's what available in His precious shed blood. The sinner is not only justified, but the sinner potentially is sanctified also. The believer is given a new nature through Christ's blood, a new status, a new direction. Holiness is demanded by a holy God, He wants us to reciprocate what's in His nature. He made us in His image, He wants us to be like Him, but that's only possible through the blood - but, hallelujah, it is possible! Holiness is provided in Christ!

Do you see this? Oh, Thomas Binney put it well in his hymn summing up this whole first seven verses:

'The sons of ignorance and night,  
May dwell in the eternal Light,  
Through the eternal Love'

Is there someone here, and you've never availed of the blood of Calvary? Maybe you're a backslider, and there's sin between you and your God. Or maybe you feel you're walking in the light, but you're really walking in darkness - there's things you're hiding from God, things you're hiding from a brother or a sister. God calls you a liar if you don't feel, this evening, your need of the precious blood - because either you're denying a sin, or you're denying that there is efficacy in that blood! There's only one thing that can hinder your fellowship with God, my friend, and that is sin. You can't get it more simple than that. But there's only one thing that can restore your fellowship with God, and that is the precious blood. By the power of the blood peace has been made between God and men, by the power of the blood there is forgiveness of sins, there is the gift of eternal life, Satan is overcome by the power of the blood, says the book of the Revelation. There is continual cleansing from all sin - and the Greek word for 'all' there in verse 7 literally means 'every sin'. There's not a sin deep-dyed that the precious crimson blood cannot cleanse. You can be set free from the tyranny of an evil conscience. You can serve the living God, win freedom and peace of mind and heart. By the infinite power of the precious sinless blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, you can be brought into the immediate holy of holies presence of the living God to live there all the day long, every day of your life. Hallelujah!

'How can I experience the power of this precious blood?', you say. Look to the Lamb, 'Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world'. 'What do I need to do?' - what's the Lamb of God doing? He's bowing His head, isn't He? He's bowing His head for you, under the load of your sin. Do you know what you need to do, my friend? You need to bow your head. You need to bow that stiff-necked 'I', say 'Lord, help me to bow the head and die, beholding Him on Calvary who bowed His head for me'. Oh, you can pray all you like to be cleansed from some sin. You can pray for the peace of God to be restored to your heart. But you see, unless you're willing to be broken on the point in question, the very sin that you love more than Christ, it will never happen. Take it out of the darkness, bring it into the light, and Christ will plunge it under His blood!

Old Martin Luther on one occasion dreamt that his accuser, Satan, had set before him on a great scroll afresh all of his sins and manifold iniquities. Luther didn't argue with the devil, he just admitted them all without denying any of them. He didn't seek to justify himself before the wicked one, but do you know what he scrawled across that list? First John 1:7: 'The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin' - Hallelujah!

'I may my great accuser face
And tell him Thou hast died!

I hear my great accuser roar
Of ills that I have done.
I know them all and thousands more,
Jehovah findeth none!

Are you still in your sin tonight? Backslider, are you like the pig that is wallowing in the mire, you've gone back like a dog to the vomit? Can I tell you tonight: the blood of Jesus, oh that precious flow, will make you white as snow. No other fount you can know, nothing but the blood of Jesus, that fountain that is open for sin and uncleanness, to cleanse you now and to cleanse you continually. Will you come tonight?

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - October 2005
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Well, do turn with me to 1 John again. God willing, we'll hopefully enter chapter 2 this evening, but we have the remaining three verses to deal with in chapter 1 and so we'll read the whole of chapter 1 in order to get the flow of John's thought. Our title this evening will be "The Saint And Sin", and we'll be looking specifically at verse 8 of chapter 1 through to the second verse of chapter 2.

Verse 1 of chapter 1, then: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole world". Amen.

When the word 'saint' is mentioned to most people today, even in the church, immediately there often conjures up an unbiblical idea of its definition. Maybe it's a picture of some ancient man with a long beard and a halo around his head; it could be a woman with angels singing praise unto her; maybe it's the picture of pilgrims venerating, almost to the point of worship, someone with 'St' before their name. In some circles you can adopt your own Saint, depending on perhaps your personal disposition, or your occupation and livelihood. In your difficulties and weaknesses in life you can pray to them, and the belief often is that they will intercede for you before the throne of God. Generally speaking the perception of a saint is someone who is transcendent above normal ordinary humanity. They're like super spiritual human beings, and though they are admittedly below God, or below the Lord Jesus Christ, or even in the Catholic Church below the Virgin Mary, there's something special about them, and it's very hard for us to conceive of a saint sinning.

Now, of course, that idea of a saint is something that has been invented by the Roman Catholic system and the Orthodox Church. Anyone who reads the word of God, particularly the New Testament, will know that true saints are down to earth people, they are people like you and me, they live in the real world with real temptations and a real struggle with sin. In fact, one text - we could look at many which prove this to us - is 1 Corinthians 1 verse 2, where Paul addresses that church there: "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them
that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints", and he expands on that word 'saints', "with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's". If you know anything about the church at Corinth, you will know that they certainly were not squeaky clean as far as morality and spirituality was concerned. In fact, Paul calls them 'carnal' at one point.

So a saint is not the common perception that people have, and yet many people today - including evangelical Christians - have a dilemma of reconciling how saints, even in our New Testament evangelical understanding of that word, how saints relate to sin. You remember that we established last week in particular that this little epistle of 1 John has a theme running throughout of fellowship: our fellowship, as we see from verse 3, is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. We saw last week that you cannot claim to have fellowship with God if you walk in darkness, or you could put it 'if you walk in sin'. So we're coming to the question this week: what happens when a Christian sins? What happens if I sin as a believer? What is the relationship, after conversion, of the saint and sin?

Now this is an important subject, apart from the fact that it's outlined for us in the word of God tonight, because new converts, people who have come recently to faith in the Saviour, can often get confused about the old passions that they once knew in their pre-converted days raising their head again. They feel the struggle, maybe, that they had in their past, and they start to ask themselves: 'Have I had a real encounter and experience with God? Am I truly saved? Surely a person that's now been forgiven of sins, and experienced the new birth, and is a new creature in Christ shouldn't be feeling like this?'. Maybe that's the way you feel tonight? Then there are other zealous believers who have been on the road for a little bit longer than the new lambs in Christ, and in an attempt to trod a deeper walk and path of holiness with God they attempt to rid themselves of all sin, and to achieve some kind of sinless perfection. There are actually people running around in evangelicalism today who claim that they have this, that they have no longer any sin in their lives. Then there are others who believe in it, but they die of frustration and disappointment because they can never achieve the standard that they're seeking and searching after. Then others have developed a charismatic doctrine of some second experience from God that 'zaps' your sin nature and eradicates it. Even those who believe it is possible to be sinlessly perfect know all too well the reality of their own hearts. John Wesley is an example, and I would never criticise that man of God, that mighty giant of the faith publicly, but he did believe in sinless perfection - yet he denied personally that he possessed it. That in itself should tell us something - how could we ever achieve sinless perfection if the great John Wesley didn't?

So John answers a number of these practical questions asked in his day, and hence he gives us some answers to some questions that are asked in the church today. So we're going to learn these answers under four headings which will take the form of questions. Here's the first question that we have implied within this chapter, I believe. It's found in verse 8 and verse 10: do Christians sin? Do Christians sin? I didn't hear any answer there! The fact of the matter is that the Docetists, who later became in a certain form the Gnostics who we've been looking at over these weeks, they believed that the spirit, that part of the human being that was given by God to relate to Him, is pure; and the flesh, the physical, material realm, is that which is evil. Therefore, because they believed the spirit was pure, and that was all that really mattered to God, they believed that's all that should matter to them - but they claimed to be perfect in that particular realm of their being. So you can understand how this doctrine started to influence the church. These Docetists were teaching that the spirit, that part that had been quickened by God in salvation, was perfect.
Now John comes along and points out two facts for us to dispel any such notion from our mind. The first is found in verse 8, he says: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'. So he's pointing out first of all here: we are sinners by nature. It would be good to note these things down with a pen and paper. We are sinners by nature, and what John is speaking of there is the root of sin, that fallen Adamic nature that we have inherited from our parents in the Garden of Eden. So right away, John is saying: 'Yes, Christians do sin, because they are sinners by nature'. This is his answer to this second denial, these Docetists were encouraging others to say: 'We have no sin'. John is saying: 'If you say that you have no sin, you're deceiving yourself and the truth is not in you'. Now please notice the difference between verse 8 and verse 9: the word 'sin' is used in verse 8, and yet the word 'sins' is used in verse 9 - 'If we confess our sins'. That is an important distinction that is not irrelevant, because 'sin' speaks of our nature, 'sin' is what we are and have in our fallen nature. Whereas 'sins' is what we do, practically speaking, the sinful acts wherein we transgress the law of God.

Now taking this first type, 'sin' that we find in verse 8, John is saying you're deceiving yourself if you say that you don't have a fallen sinful nature - you certainly don't deceive anyone else, that's for sure! I don't know whether there's anybody here tonight that's claiming sinless perfection, but I'd love to talk to your next-door neighbours - especially if you're in a semidetached - or maybe even your husband or your wife, or your wider family circle. As Robbie Burns said 'Oh, for the gift to see ourselves as others see us'. But you see, what John is pointing out here is that we are not seeing ourselves as we really are if we actually think that we can get rid of our sinful nature. Now the converse of that for us tonight, hopefully I'm preaching to the converted who believe that we all have a sinful nature, even those of us who are converted, is: do we really believe it to any significant extent? Do we believe - and this is the bottom line - that we are much worse in our sinful nature than anything that we could do as a sinful act? Do you believe that? Conjure up in your mind the most awful sin that you can imagine, and what the doctrine of the sinful nature teaches is: what we are is far worse than anything we could ever do.

The whole of Scripture bears this out, I don't have time tonight to expound it all for you, but in Psalm 51 and verse 5 David could say: 'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me'. Romans 5 verse 12: 'As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned'. John says: 'If you really believe that you don't have a sinful nature, that you have no sin, you deceive yourself and the truth is not in you'. Not only does that mean that you're not agreeing with the truth of Scripture that I just read, but he's actually inferring that the divine reality of true eternal life is not in you, the truth is not in you.

So we establish right away from John that conversion is not the eradication of the sinful nature. This so often discourages young converts, and I make a point during my young converts classes and discipleship course to point out to those who have come newly to faith in Christ that they still have a fallen sinful nature. Now do you know that? Maybe you're a long time on the road, and often after conversion, because you're given new eyes to see yourself and your sinfulness before God, you can see your sin more than you have ever done, and you can become even more discouraged than before you were saved. Praise God, the new birth gives an implantation of a new nature, and with it gives us the power to live victoriously over indwelling sin - that's the wonder of the Gospel message, but don't believe the lie that in some way your old sinful nature disappears. You can reckon it dead through the cross, the power of it has been extracted through the blood of Jesus, but it's still there and if you feel it you'll know all about it. We are sinners by nature, John says, don't deceive yourselves.
Then secondly, he says in verse 10: we are sinners by practice. If the nature is the root of sin that's in all of us, the practice is the fruit of sin. 'If we say', verse 10, 'that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us'. This is the third denial that these Docetists were implying within this church by their false doctrine. They're not saying now that we have no sin, but that we have not sinned. What they are saying is, practically speaking, we do not do things that are wrong. Now John says: 'If you say that, you're making God a liar', because God clearly teaches through His word that you do do things that are wrong. Psalm 14, for instance: 'The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one'. Romans 3:23: 'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God'. God's word says that we have all sinned - and not only that, but the Bible and the Gospel teaches that it's because we have all sinned that Jesus had to go to the cross and die for sin. So if we deny our fruit of sinfulness in our lives, we're actually denying the reason why Christ had to go to Calvary. His word is not in us, John says - how could it be, if His word teaches the opposite that we claim if we say that we don't practice sin?

In 1775 Augustus Toplady, who was the author of the hymn 'Rock of Ages' and many other great Gospel hymns, published an article in which he attempted to assess England's guilt as a nation in terms of the national debt. His conclusion was that England would never be able to pay its moral debt to God. Then he calculated that if, as individuals, we sinned every second of our lives, we would each run up 2,522,880,000 sins if we lived to the ripe old age of 80. How could anyone claim that they do not practice sin, or have a sinful nature? Do Christians sin? Yes, they do! To say anything else or claim anything else, God's word categorically states, is to deceive yourself, not to practise truth, to call God a liar, and God's word does not nor cannot dwell in you.

Here's the second question that must be an offshoot of this one: should Christians sin? Because right away someone will say: 'Well, if you're saying Christians do sin, are you not encouraging us?'. It's the implication of Romans 6:1: 'Should we continue in sin that grace may abound?'. These Docetists were guilty of what we called last week 'antinomianism'. Now don't be confused with all these words, because they're very simply explained. 'Antinomianism' means 'anti-law' - these Docetists, because they believed that the spirit was the only pure thing, and the flesh didn't matter because it would be burned up by God in the judgment day, they thought: 'Well, just use the flesh in whatever way you want! You don't need to obey the law in the physical sense'. So they were committing all sorts of sin, that's what this 'dualism' lead to - the spirit was holy, but the flesh was weak, and so they were sinning. John says categorically: 'This is the reason for my writing', if you look at verse 1 of chapter 2: 'My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not'. It doesn't say 'that you sin just a little bit', but 'that you sin not'.

Now here we need to get the balance: whilst we do not in any way claim that we can be sinlessly perfect, whilst the Bible teaches that our old sinful nature still resides in us, the fact of the matter is that we ought not to encourage sin or condone sin in any shape or form. Now there may seem to be a contradiction there, and we'll iron that one out in a few moments, but let us make clear: God is a holy God, and God says 'Be ye perfect, for I, the Lord your God, am perfect'.

Calvin Coolidge was the president of the United States in the 1920s, and he was renowned for never using an unnecessary word - he obviously wasn't a preacher! But one Sunday morning
he went to church and, on returning home, he was asked what the subject the preacher spoke about was, and he replied one word: 'Sin'. The frustrated questioner said: 'Well, what did he say about sin?'. Characteristically Coolidge said: 'He's agin'it' - he's against it! That, put very simply, is the way God is, and the way we should be regarding sin. We ought to abhor it with a holy hate, for this is why John wrote. He's not saying: 'I'm writing in some way to excuse your misdemeanours', but 'The reason for my writing is that ye sin not'. Don't take any consolation out of your sinning tonight from the message.

Secondly, he also says that sin should be the exception rather than the rule. So, answering the question: 'Should Christians sin?'. 'No, that's the reason I'm writing this letter', but he says, 'If any man sin' - sin should be an exception in the life of the believer, certainly not the rule or the lifestyle. As we go through this book we'll find out that if your lifestyle is a lifestyle of habitual sin, you're not a believer. We will not be completely free from sin until we are free from these bodies of death, Paul teaches that. We will not be free from the sinful nature until we are redeemed body, soul and spirit in the presence of the Lord Jesus, but the implication of Scripture to all of us is that our responsibility is to seek after holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

Do Christians sin? Yes. Should Christians sin? No. Here's the third question: what happens when a Christian sins? The answer is found in the second half of chapter 2 verse 1, and also chapter 2 verse 2. Here's the dilemma, and this is where I've brought you to now: we have a sinful nature. He has established that - do Christians sin? Yes, they have a sinful nature, therefore they practice sin. They show the fruit of sin in their daily life, that we have established from John. 'But yet you're saying that John says Christians should not sin - now that just doesn't seem to make sense. What's the answer to this contradictory equation?'. We have a sinful nature, we practice sin, yet we're told not to sin. Here are some of the answers that people give to this, and this is where some of the heretics come in here in John's day. They deny the sinful nature - in order to make the equation balance, deny one half of it, say we don't have a sinful nature. That's what the Gnostics were doing: 'The spirit is pure' - it led to antinomianism. Then a second answer was: if you don't deny the nature, deny the practice, say that you have overcome it completely. That led to an asceticism, monks going away from the world, cutting themselves off from anything like the flesh - whether it was food, whether it was sex, whether it was clothing to warm themselves or even a roof over their heads, deny the practice of sin by harming the flesh rather than giving in to it. Then thirdly the implication for some was: threaten the loss of salvation, and then people will stop sinning. Tell them that if you sin, you'll lose your eternal life and you'll be damned in hell. Often those that believe in sinless perfection also believe that you can lose your salvation through sin. Now if you're one of those people here tonight, I want to ask you a very very simple but elementary question: how big does your sin need to be to damn you? Because once you get into that realm, you're into Catholicism, mortal sins and venial sins, sins that will damn you and you'll have to burn in Purgatory to burn it off, or sins that you can get forgiven through confession and penance and so on.

That reflects the problem with all these answers that the Docetists, and indeed any heretics, give to the problem of sin - because their answer characteristically is: 'To stay saved, to stay sanctified, the emphasis is on you', but the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message that John declared unto this church, that Christ declared unto him, was 'The emphasis is not on you, it is on Christ!'. That is not a simple and meaningless detail, that is the fundamental truth on which all error is derived: emphasising self rather than Christ. Now it's not to say, and do not misunderstand that this is what I say, that we are not responsible for our own holiness or our own practical sanctification - you could never use 1 John to prove that! But what John is
saying is: the source of any holiness that we may have and our sanctification is not found within us; just as we agree, hopefully, that our salvation does not rest on our own virtue, neither does our fellowship.

The real answer to how the saint relates to sin is found in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2. Here's the first answer: how can we solve this dilemma? The Christian has a sinful nature, he practices sin, yet he is told by a holy God not to sin: how can you explain it? Verse 1, the second half: 'We have an advocate' - if any man sin, we have an advocate. Now, relating to eternal security, let me just point this out in the second half of verse 1, it says: 'We have an advocate with the Father'. Do mark the designation for God there, it doesn't say we have an advocate with God, but we have an advocate with the Father - meaning that if a man sin, God is still your Father. A son may disgrace his father, but if he is his son it's a fact of birth, not a fact of behaviour. What John's talking about here is not judicial forgiveness, this is where people often get confused with 1 John 1 and 2, they think that we need to continually get saved, almost, and have our sins atoned for as we come and confess them to God, and if we don't do it and die after committing a sin, we'll go to hell. That's not what John is saying, this is parental forgiveness, fellowship is what is in view in 1 John. If we want to continue in fellowship, we need to avail ourselves of our Advocate with the Father.

Now look very carefully at this word 'advocate' in verse 1, because you'll be interested - or maybe not so interested! - to know that in the Greek language it is the word 'paracletos'. 'Paracletos' is the word that is used for 'the Comforter', that is the Holy Spirit spoken of in John 14 and John 16, who the Father and the Son would send after the Lord Jesus left this scene of time. It's often translated 'the Counsellor', it is sometimes translated 'the Advocate', and the Holy Spirit for the believer is the Comforter and the Advocate of the child of God before a hostile world. The Lord, before He left the world, said: 'I will send to you another Advocate who will defend you, who will comfort you in all your persecution. Let not your heart be troubled'. But here we have this word used of the Lord Jesus, speaking of Him after He was crucified, the third day rising from the grave, ascending in glory at the right hand of God, He represents us as an Advocate, a Paracletos with the Father.

It's spoken of in Romans chapter 8 and verse 34 if you turn with me to it for a moment, Romans chapter 8 and verse 34: 'Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us'. I haven't time to launch into an exposition of the epistle to the Ephesians, but a great deal of the material there is all about how it is Christ, as our Advocate, as our Counsellor that brings us before God - and because of His cross work, and His precious blood, He is able to represent us and bring us into the very holiest place of all because of His righteousness and His merits through His work. So this word 'Paracletos', 'Counsellor', 'Advocate' means literally 'one who pleads for another in a court of justice'. It literally speaks of the counsel for the defence, it is a friend in the court. You've heard the quip: 'It's not what you know, but who you know' - that's often said in a negative sense, but here it is in a positive sense. We cannot know enough to save ourselves, we cannot achieve enough to save ourselves, we certainly cannot present any evidence - credible, that is - to save ourselves before God, but if we know the Advocate...! If any man sin, what happens is this 'Paracletos' - this is the sense of the Greek - comes alongside us in our sin.

Can I ask you a question here, as we pause for a moment: how do you think of the Saviour when you fall into sin? Do you think of Him with a big stick ready to hammer the daylights out of you? Do you know what this is teaching us? That when a believer sins and falls, Christ, as a Paraclete, a Counselor, a Comforter, as an Advocate comes alongside at the very
moment of our falling - He does not leave us, He does not condemn us, but He comes to help us in our time of need. Christ never condemns us - hallelujah! If you look at Romans chapter 8 for a moment: 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?' - that means in a court of law, if you have Christ at your defence, He is also the only one who is righteous enough to judge you, and He brings no charge to you! Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? He's not bringing a charge if you're in Him by faith. Who is he that condemns? There is no judge, because Christ is the only one worthy, but He's not judging you for there's no condemnation - as verse 1 of chapter 8 says - to those who are in Christ Jesus. In verse 35: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?', there's no jailer, there's no one who is going to take you away and lock you up for your sins, because Christ has you - hallelujah!

Who condemns the believer then? Are you in Christ tonight, and you're sitting here and there's sins that are coming before your conscience just now - one, after one, after one - and you're feeling condemned, you're feeling filthy? Maybe every time you come into a place like this and sing the hymns, hear the preaching, you feel: 'Oh, I know I'm saved, but I feel so unworthy' - who is condemning you? It's not Christ if you're truly born-again! The accuser of the brethren is by definition Satan, that's what 'Satan' means: 'one who throws at'. He is the accuser of the brethren, throwing mud at the child of God hoping that it will stick to them. We read in the book of Job that he came before God, and he accused Job before the Divine of being a hypocrite: 'If You touch his flesh, skin for skin, he's only serving You because You're giving him produce and wealth'. Then he came to Joshua, the High Priest in the book of Zechariah. Joshua stood before the Lord, we read, and Satan stood at his right hand to resist him. We read that he accused Joshua, but the Lord, it says, rebuked the accuser, the Lord pleaded Joshua's cause and told those who stood by to take away his filthy garments and give him pure clean white robes.

But Satan still condemns and accuses the brethren - Revelation 10:12 says he accuses them before God day and night. I'm speaking to someone here this evening, and you have experienced his accusations to the point of almost torture. Maybe it's not him at all, maybe it's your conscience, your conscience can condemn you - we'll find that out in this book - but God is greater than our conscience! The law can condemn you, it condemns us all for none of us reach the standard of it, and the world can even accuse us as Christians and point the finger - whether legitimately or illegitimately - but do you know what the word of God is saying here? What does a Christian do when they sin or when they are accused of sin? What do you do? Do you stand in the dock? Do you try and contradict the devil, the law, your conscience, the world? Do you try and satisfy your intellect, your reasoning and rationale? Do you know what God's word is saying? Don't argue! Don't make any excuses! Throw yourself on Christ! He is the Advocate, He is the one who maketh intercession for the transgressors. Him the Father heareth always - don't you try and argue your case! Lift up your heads:

'Your Advocate appears
For your defense on high;
His plea the Father hears
And lays His thunder by.
Not all that hell or sin can say
Shall turn His heart, His love, away'.

Our Advocate - listen to it now, child of God, wherever you are tonight - He has never lost a case yet, and He never will! What happens when a Christian sins? 'If any man sin', oh, let it heal your heart, let it soothe your soul, 'We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'. But we have more than an Advocate, for verse 2 of chapter 2 says: 'He is the
propitiation for our sins'. Indeed, He's not only our propitiation, but He's the propitiation for the whole world. Now let me point out here that most modern translations, including the NIV and the RSV, obscure the meaning of 'propitiation', which is the Greek word 'hilasmos'. They choose obscure terms that refer to removal of guilt or removal of punishment, whereas the Greek word literally means - as the Authorised and the Revised version translates it - 'the removal of wrath'. Propitiation doesn't just mean expiation, it doesn't just mean 'an atoning sacrifice' - though those things are incorporated in it - but what it specifically speaks of is the fact, as Romans 1 verse 18 teaches, that the wrath of God has been revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of ungodly sinners. God is an angry God against sin, He is angry with the wicked every day.

Now in our politically correct society people, even theologians, are wanting to extract this attribute from God, that God is angry - we don't like an angry God. But there is, we have to see it in scripture, a divine wrath in the heart of God toward sin, and grace and forgiveness is far from sweeping God's anger under the carpet and ignoring it and pretending it doesn't exist - but you want to see the damage that that does to the Gospel message! What am I talking about? Well, at the very centre of the Gospel is the cross, and at the centre of the cross is propitiation. What am I talking about? Well, we get a clue to it in Hebrews 9, because the word 'propitiation' is translated there as 'the mercy seat'. It was the place where the cherubim met at the top of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holiest of Holies in the Tabernacle. That was the place where God ordained that He should meet with man, the High Priest once every year, but in order that that should happen the blood had to be sprinkled on the mercy seat - that was the only grounds upon which man could come to God. The message of the cross is that His blood has been shed, He has gone into the heavenlies with His own blood as a propitiation, sprinkled it on the holiest place of all that God should be satisfied and we should enter to have fellowship.

Now if you take that away, you take away the Gospel. I labour this point because there are many seeking to do just that in these days. I don't know whether you've ever heard of Steve Chalke, but he is a popular Christian TV personality, he used to come on breakfast television - I think it was the ITV version of it. He used to speak, I remember when I was at school, at 'MannaFest' and 'Youth For Christ' meetings and so on - he was flown over and he would speak to them, and he's written books. He has written a book recently, in 2003, entitled 'The Lost Message of Jesus', published by Grand Rapids and Zondervan, and this book has caused outrage in the evangelical world. He actually asks how we as believers, particularly as evangelicals, can - and I quote: 'Come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent His anger and wrath on His own Son'. How can we believe that? He believes that God should only be displayed as a God of love, not a God of anger, and he considers it to be mockery to say that Jesus taught that God could punish Him. It is a contradiction of the statement, he says, that 'God is love'. He says that 'Such a view of the cross would make the atonement', and I quote him again, 'a form of cosmic child abuse, a vengeful father punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed'. Because of that, Steve Chalke has stopped preaching penal substitution - that is, that Christ was punished as our substitute on the cross. He believes that the cross is simply Christ's identification with all who feel suffering and anxiety, who feel godforsaken and suffer in this world. That is heresy, and it is blasphemy of the deepest, darkest and damnable kind - and not only is it that, it is pure ignorance and a failure to see that God at the cross is not just venting His righteous wrath on His Son, but He is venting His righteous wrath on Himself! Jesus said: 'I and my Father are one', that means in purpose and in will, and Jesus Christ did not have to have His arm put up His back to go to Calvary, He set His face as a flint to go to Jerusalem. He was determined to go, even through
the agony of Gethsemane, it could not turn Him back. The Father and the Son and the Spirit were all in agreement and counsel together at Calvary. It was the only way, and - hallelujah - it is the finished way! Steve Chalke, or whoever else, can deny it, but they deny salvation for themselves and for the whole world - because not only is He the propitiation for our sins, but for the whole world.

Now, you'd love me to skip over that one, wouldn't you? Huh! Well, what it doesn't teach is 'universalism', that means that everybody will be saved - that is not what John is saying here. Our salvation is by grace through faith, and if faith is not exercised it matters not how many men Christ died for, you cannot be saved - so be assured that universalism is not taught here. Some believe that it generally teaches that all races and all creeds and cultures can be saved, and of course that is what it teaches in a general sense as well, and it's interesting to note that the superscription at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ above His head was in Hebrew, the language of the Jews, Greek and Latin, the language of the known world at that time. But I don't believe that the meaning here can be limited just to those two definitions, what it is not and what it is in a racial sense. Let me say categorically that the atonement of Christ can only be effective, and only works for those who have believed and embraced it by faith - but the thought, I believe, that John is communicating to us here is that the cross work of Christ is sufficient in its nature to save the whole world!

Now you remember that these Docetists were probably denying this in the fact that they believed that they were the select few. But let me say - and I know I'm touching sore points here, but sure why change the habit of a lifetime? - there are those who call themselves 'Calvinists'...bear with me...and these Calvinists censure those who offer an open invitation in the Gospel. Now listen carefully to what I'm saying: I preach an open invitation to all men when I preach Christ and Him crucified. I have been criticised, not in this church but particularly over the Internet, for preaching an open invitation in the gospel - these people call themselves 'Calvinists', and they're not Calvinists! They're Hyper-Calvinists. I'm not standing here in defence of Calvinism, but I'm telling you this: Hyper-Calvinism has been a curse, like a cancer, on Gospel preaching in our land, in our pulpits, and in our churches. I believe in election, very strongly, I believe in the sovereignty of God, I believe there's a special sense in which Christ died for His sheep and for the church, but there is a respect in which the death of Christ was for the world, because His sacrifice was infinite! Sometimes I think that people are doing sums with a calculator of all the sins that Christ bore, making sure that they were in it all - that's not the way you think of Calvary! Let me illustrate it like this: if only one man was to be saved, Christ would not have needed to suffer any less. What He suffered on the cross would have to have been, if only one man was to be saved. But equally, if all were to be saved, Christ would need not have suffered any more - the work was done so that the offer can be given to all men!

Now, poor old Calvin, he never gets a chance to defend himself! One day he'll fill us in, hopefully - if he was one of the elect, that is! Then in John 3:16, listen to His commentary, listen to it: 'God has employed the universal term 'whosoever', both to invite all indiscriminately to partake of life, and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the import of the word 'world', which he formerly used; for though nothing will be found in the world that is worthy of the favour of God, yet he shows himself to be reconciled to the whole world, when he invites all men without exception to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than an entrance into life'. He is the propitiation for our sins, and for the sins of the whole world, so that I can say to you tonight, person who is without Christ: if you embrace Him this evening, you can be sure that everyone who comes unto Him, He will never cast out. But you can only be sure that He died and bore your sin if you come to Him. There are two sides to
there are a lot of people running around and they deny election, they deny God's sovereignty in salvation, and that is equally as wrong - but the Bible has the balance of the two, and the balance isn't to be found in the middle denying both, but like a seesaw you get balance when you go to either end. Don't be off balance.

What happens when a Christian sins? Well, if any man sin, we have an Advocate; He is our propitiation; He has satisfied the wrath and anger of a just God - and thirdly and finally, He is faithful and just to forgive sin and to cleanse, chapter 1 verse 9. That word 'faithful' is wonderful, isn't it? Timothy says: 'If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself'. What John is saying is because God, in Christ, has established a righteous and just basis upon which sins can be forgiven, He promises every man, if they confess sin upon that foundation, He will forgive - He is faithful! Why would you ever doubt His promise? Child of God, don't doubt your salvation! If you're believing in Christ, embrace Him with all your heart, and know that He is yours and you are His. He is faithful, and He is righteous.

Now, you might think that's a strange word - why didn't he say 'He is merciful to forgive us of our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness'? Because that's not the point he's trying to get across, he's wanting to show us that God is just and the justifier of them who believe in Jesus. What do I mean? Christ is righteous, Christ isn't sweeping the sin under the carpet, He's not diluting the righteous wrath of God to get us through the door of heaven some way, but He is remaining absolutely righteous, even as His Father. But this is the point, if I could illustrate it from John chapter 8, a young woman caught in the act of adultery, she is dragged by the religious Pharisees, the legalists, brought to the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ - 'Stone her, according to the law of Moses!'. Jesus says: 'Let him that is among you without sin cast the first stone'. Never leave out those words 'among you', 'Let him among you' - because Christ was righteous enough to be able to stone that girl, none of the rest of them were! He was the only one who could condemn - who is it that condemnheth and is right to? It is Christ! But what did He say to the girl? He, being the only righteous judge, yet He says to her as they leave - the oldest to the youngest, condemned by their own sin - 'Where are thine accusers?'. Do you remember what He said to her? What was it? 'Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more'.

Let me say this: Jesus' blood will never cover a sin that you will not uncover. Is that plain enough? I know you can't remember them all, but admit that: confess, and then secondly believe. Believe that He is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse. You've got to grasp it! A lot of people confess their sins and ask the Lord to save them, but they don't take it away with them in their heart, they take their sins away again - they don't leave them with Christ. They start to worry: 'Am I really saved?' - maybe this old nature causes them. Believe! Christ has said it, I believe it, and that should settle it! Confess, believe, and then thirdly be clean. Be cleansed:
'Though the restless foe accuses,  
Sins recounting like a flood,  
Every charge our God refuses –  
Christ has answered with His blood'.

The girl that came to Christ last evening was a bit afraid to come and talk to me - I don't know why that should be! Do you? Her aunt told me, after she came to Christ, she thought she would have to tell me all her sins. Isn't it wonderful not to need any priest, but the Great High Priest who is touched with the feelings of our infirmities, and who has already made a propitiation for our sins. Now here's the punchline: why should there ever be sin in the life of a believer that should rob them from such a fellowship as this? Bring it into the light! Put it under the blood and get rid of it!

I read today a story of Spurgeon, and he was crossing the street one day and he suddenly stopped in the middle of the road - it looked as if he was praying, and he was. One of his deacons - they always have an answer for everything! - they waited on the other side of the street, and said to him 'You could have been run down by a carriage there. What were you doing? You looked as if you were praying'. He said: 'I was praying'. The deacon said: 'Well, could it not have waited? Was it that important?'. This was his reply: 'Indeed it was important, a cloud came between me and my Saviour, and I wanted to remove it even before I got across the street'. Is that the way you cherish our fellowship with the Father and with the Son. Oh, listen to this tonight, don't miss it: if any man sin, if any woman sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. If you confess that sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us, for the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from every sin.

Oh our Father, we thank You that we can say 'Abba', oh the Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the sons of God. The presence of His Son, the Spirit answering to the blood, tells me I am born of God. Lord, this is wonderful, oh let us never lose the sight of the freshly slain Lamb in the midst of heaven for us, His wounds pleading on our behalf. If we could hear the Son of God mention our names in the room next to us, it would give us courage to fight any enemy, and yet He still pleads for me. Oh Lord, bless us tonight, if there's a backslider may this restore them to Your grace; unsaved souls, let them see the blood that can liberate them and change them. Glorify Your Son tonight in all our lives, we pray, Amen.
We're turning to 1 John again and chapter 2, and our title this evening - as we will be studying, in the will of the Lord, if we get through it, verses 3 to 11 - the title being 'Practical Christianity'. We begin our reading at verse 3:

"And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked. Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth. He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes."

A book that I have recommended to you on several occasions is Roy Hession's classic 'The Calvary Road', and I again commend it to you - buy it and be encouraged and instructed from it. In chapter 3 of his book under the title 'The Way of Fellowship', he makes some comments which are very helpful regarding the understanding of the truths that we're looking at this evening. He says this: 'When man first fell in the Garden of Eden, and chose to make himself rather than God the centre of his life, the effect was not only man out of fellowship with God, but also out of fellowship with his fellow man. The story of man's first quarrel with God in Genesis chapter 3 is closely followed in the fourth chapter by the story of man's first quarrel with his fellow man - Cain's murder of Abel. We live in a world where man does not just want his own way against God's way, but his own way against his fellow man's way - hence the tensions, barriers, suspicions, misunderstandings, clashes and conflicts that we experience as human beings'.

Now 1 John teaches us that when, as we have learned in chapter 1, our quarrel with God - sin - is put right, and through the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the confession of our sins, He is faithful and just because of the atonement made at Calvary to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness - when that happens, and when we intend to obey God's commands, we then as a result will have fellowship with one another as human beings. First John teaches us, and we'll see tonight, that the depth and reality of man's fellowship with God can be tested on two counts. One: his obedience to God's command; and two: his fellowship with his fellow man. The depth of your real spiritual experience can be tested on those two grounds: whether you're obeying God's word, and whether you're living in peace and harmony and love with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now we know already, and we've learnt in past weeks, that this little epistle of 1 John is an epistle about assurance. Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying tonight, I will not
be expounding the word of God to say that you have to obey God's commands to be saved, or you have to love your brethren to be saved - that is not what this book is teaching. It's not teaching how you can be saved, but it's rather teaching how you can know that you're saved, what the signs of assurance are. You cannot get saved by obeying God's command or loving your brethren, but obeying God's commands and loving the brethren are signs that we are saved, and can be used as tests to see whether or not we are converted.

Now I wonder am I speaking to someone here tonight? You have had the age-old problem of many a child of God, you have a lack of assurance, you're troubled about your salvation. Maybe at one time you were certain that you were saved, and right at the beginning of your pilgrimage you had a real joy, satisfaction, and an assurance that you were one of God's children - but now things are different, for whatever reason. You're wondering tonight: 'How can I know if I'm truly saved?'. That's exactly the question that John is answering in this particular first epistle: how do we know that we know God? How do we know that we are in fellowship with Him?

We have learned already in chapter 1 verse 5 through to chapter 2 verse 2 that the means of maintaining this fellowship with God is through the precious blood of Christ, through confession and repentance from our sins, and trusting in what Christ has done and that alone. But now we're looking at verses 3 to 11 of chapter 2, which outlines for us the signs of true fellowship with God. How do we know that we have taken this step effectually? What are the tests to really know that we are in touch with God, that we are having fellowship with God?

If you lack assurance this evening, here are the two tests that we'll be looking at this evening. Now in chapter 1, in the first four verses or so, we've already looked at the doctrinal test of whether we are true Christians. That was the doctrine of what authentic Christianity really was, and we looked at it under that title on that particular week - we have to believe what is right concerning the Son of God, we have to believe in the historical and the biblical Christ. But here we will find this week that we're looking at the moral test and the social test of practical Christianity. Our Christianity is only authentic Christianity when it is practical Christianity in both a moral and a social sense.

So we'll look first of all at the moral test, what is that? It's found in verses 3 to 6, it is obedience to the Word. Now the statement is found in verse 4, verse 6 and verse 9: 'He that saith' - it's a bit like the three statements that we found in chapter 1, 'If we say', 'If we say', 'If we say'. Now he uses another three in chapter 2: 'He that saith', 'He that saith', 'He that saith'. Now, before I tell you what they're saying, it is interesting to note that it is the easiest thing in the world to make a profession. It's the easiest thing to utter words out of your mouth, and say something, and even think that you mean it. Incidentally, as we look at verse 4, what they are saying, those who John is quoting, is: 'I know Him', 'We know Him'. Then in verse 6 what they're saying is: 'I abide in Him'. Then in verse 9 they say that they are 'in the light'. The frightening thing for us should be tonight that we can say those three things, and of course we do, all of us who take the name of Christ would say 'I know Him. I abide in Him. I'm walking in the light with Him' - but, almost reminiscent of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 7:22 in the Sermon on the Mount, John is saying that it doesn't matter how vehemently we cry 'Lord, Lord', it doesn't even matter what we do in the name of Christ or say, what matters is whether we keep His commandments.

So in verse 3 of chapter 2 he says: 'Hereby we do know that we know him', and this is the basis for all he will say up to verse 11, 'if we keep his commandments'. Now he deals with the first 'He that saith' in verse 4: 'He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his
commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him'. To say that we have fellowship with God, we know the Lord Jesus Christ, and not to keep His commands, is to be a liar - and John says the truth is not in you. He doesn't miss and hit the wall, this Son of Thunder, even with grace and conversion!

We have to remember the context of what John was writing to, you remember these Docetists that I talked to you about in recent weeks. They were the forerunners of the later Gnostics, and although they hadn't been formed into a religious group as such, their teachings were in embryo even in the early church, and contaminating it. They claimed that they were special elect beings who had a superior knowledge of God - and this word 'knowledge' was very intrinsic to their vocabulary. They knew God in a way that the ordinary run-of-the-mill Christian didn't. For that reason, John uses the word 'gnosko', from which we get 'Gnostic', which is the Greek word for 'knowledge', 25 times in the first epistle of John. He uses another similar word, 'hoida', 15 times. What he's wanting to bring to the Christian's attention in Ephesus is that this is the true knowledge of God. The interesting thing is that these Gnostics and Docetists, they had a great intrigue with this special, superior, charismatic knowledge of God - but they had no interest in keeping God's commandments. They were living the lives of reprobates.

So John comes in and he says: 'No, this is how you know Him. Those who know Him', verse 5, 'keep His word'. In spite of what they claim, they keep His word - verse 5: 'But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him'. Now this is not sinless perfection, and a lot of charismatics often latch on to this verse to claim that, and blatantly ignore what we've already learned in chapter 1 verse 8 and verse 10, that if we say that we have no sin or have not sinned, we make God a liar, we deceive ourselves, and the truth and His word is not in us. What John's talking about here is that there should be in the Christian a habitual desire to please the Lord. It doesn't mean you please Him all of the time, it doesn't mean you're perfect, it doesn't mean that you never sin - in fact, chapter 1 teaches us that at times we will sin, but even though we fail our Lord on occasions there is a deep desire which is wrought by the Spirit in our heart to please the Lord.

Do you have that this evening? Do you keep His word? This is one of the ways we can know that we are a child of God. So John's teaching us that knowing God doesn't come through some kind of mystical experience while we fast and pray and flagellate ourselves, or lock ourselves up in a monastery somewhere. It doesn't come through superior intellectual knowledge, or a charismatic revelation, but it comes by bare, naked, raw obedience. Here's how we know Him and have fellowship with Him: if we keep His commandments, if we keep His word. If it wasn't found in the Scriptures, it would be a new revelation to many in Christianity in the age in which we live! We're all looking for quick fixes, we're all looking for new fads and new ways of knowing a little bit more of God - but John says that the way we can know God, the way that the love of God is perfected in us, is through obedience. Would you love, tonight, for God's love to be perfected in you?

Now it's not referring, I don't believe, to the love that we have for God, I believe it's referring to His 'agape' is the word, 'love' in us, for us, but which is displayed outwardly. It comes down from heaven and it channels in us and through us to those around, and that word 'agape' is used 18 times in this particular epistle, more than in any other book in the whole of the New Testament. The whole import of what John is saying here is that the whole goal and aim of God's love, sending Christ to the cross to die, to be buried, to rise again, is with one sole goal: that you would be an obedient child of God, that you would do His will, that you would obey His commandment, that His word would be in your heart. Now this phrase 'His word',
'keep His word', is not just keeping His commandments, because His commandments are scattered right throughout Scripture in intermittent places. But 'His word' has a deeper sense of actually 'God's will'. If you are an authentic Christian, and you want to test the authenticity of your Christianity, it will be tested through this moral test: that you keep His word. In other words, you walk in His will. You fail from time to time, I know, but generally speaking you have a great desire in your heart to please the Lord.

Is that not what Romans 8 verse 28 teaches us? We quote it in a different context, but listen to how it is found in the context of Romans 8 as Paul teaches it: 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose' - what is His purpose? - 'For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren'. God desires that we should do His will, and the reason why He has lavished His love upon us away in eternity past when He chose us in Christ, the moment and hour that He saved us, and then as He sanctified us, and as He's progressively bringing us closer to Himself, is that we should manifest the very life of Christ in our lives! 'I am crucified with Christ', Paul says in Galatians, 'It is not I that live any more, but Christ that lives through me. The life that I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me'. Keep His word, that's how you'll know that you know Him, keep His will.

Then secondly, we find in verse 6, not only have you to keep His word but you have to walk His walk. The second 'He that saith': 'He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also' - what sobering words - 'to walk, even as he walked'. Now, although the Saviour is first and foremost our Saviour, He is also our example. In John 13 verse 15 He said it Himself: 'For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you'. We often don't think of the Lord Jesus in this light, that His life as set forth in the Gospels - Matthew to John - is to be our life's pattern, it is to be our guide as to how we ought to live. Now don't misunderstand me: it's not that we can do what Christ did, there is an extent to which that is true, and we shall do greater things than He, but that does not mean that we'll be able to perform the mighty miracles at times that He displayed - not do what He did, but rather walk as He walked, and that is a more profound thing. Because even those who say 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Thy name, did we not cast out demons in Thy name, did we not do many mighty miracles in Thy name' - they have displayed charismatic powers, but they do not walk as He walked. Indeed, Martin Luther said: 'It is not Christ walking on the sea, but His ordinary walk that we are called on here to imitate'.

Now I know that there's a great debate going on, and there always has been in Christianity, about whether we are a people who live by rules or by principles, or whether it's just grace, it's a bit of a free for all. Each generation debates about what the rules of Christianity. Well, I'm going to give you the one sole rule by which all other rules can be measured. It's simply this, verse 6: we are to walk as He walked. Does that not settle a whole lot of disputes? Of course, we can only walk as He walked if we are walking, living through His Spirit, because the only life that pleases God is the life of Christ, and we are to die to ourselves - for Christ has put us to death on Calvary, and we are to lie low and allow Christ to live through us. It's only then, when we walk as He walked, John says in 1 John and chapter 2 verse 6, that we will abide in Him.

Is that not what he taught in that famous passage of Scripture - I believe Eddie Ray was preaching on it in my absence two weeks ago - chapter 15 and verse 10, Jesus said: 'If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love'. You only abide when you keep His word, and when
you walk as He walked. That is the moral test: it is obedience to His word, it is walking as He walked in a moral sense - are you there, my friend? There's so much nonsense taught in contemporary Christianity today about what is legitimate. Some are saying: 'I don't need to live like this, as long as I love the Saviour, that's all that matters'. Many evangelicals are coming to the conclusion that doctrine is not important, all that matters is that your life and your teaching and conduct is ruled by love - but we see here that that is not the case. Yes, love is so important, and if we don't have love we have nothing - but we have to keep His word, and we have to walk as He walked. If we don't, we ought to doubt the authenticity of our Christian experience, whatever it may be. Now that's serious stuff - you apply that to your heart tonight.

Then secondly there is the social test. The moral test was obedience to the word, but the social test is love to your brother and sister in Christ. We find that in verses 7 to 11, and here we have the specific commands that we are to obey. There's a great debate: do we obey the ten commandments? Do we obey the Pentateuch, Genesis to Deuteronomy? Do we obey the Levitical laws, and the rituals and ceremonies of the Old Testament? What do we obey? Is it just Christ's law we obey? Or is it just the epistles, does the Sermon on the Mount not apply today? All this is discussed. But the Lord is saying through John, as He said Himself, that there is one commandment that we ought to obey: Love. He even addresses them in chapter 2 and verse 7, the Authorised says 'brethren', the word is really 'beloved', 'agapetoi' (sp?) - and it's used six times within this book. John is reinforcing again that what is necessary is that we love one another. John says: 'This is not a new commandment, but it's an old commandment which you've had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning'.

Now what is 'the beginning'? Well, of course, in his gospel chapter 1 and verse 1 it was creation. The Word was there in the beginning. In this epistle in chapter 1 and verse 1, we find that 'the beginning' speaks of when Christ was incarnated in the flesh, and lived among men, and they heard what He said, and they delivered it to the church. But of course this command to love one another is not a new command, Jesus was not the first to speak these words, it is given in the Old Testament law in the book of Leviticus 19:18 that we are to love our neighbour. But John, I believe, when he talks about 'the beginning', is speaking in the context of where he spoke in chapter 1 and verse 1 of our Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew comments on it and gives us an understanding when he tells us that Christ actually claimed, Matthew chapter 22, that the law, the prophets, and all of the Old Testament was summed up in Himself and in the command to love your neighbour and to love your God. Indeed, he bears this out if you look at chapter 4 and verse 21: 'And this commandment have we from him', from Christ. This is this commandment at the beginning, when Christ came into the world and taught that he who loveth God, loves his brother also. Indeed, in John 15:21, the Lord Jesus said: 'A new commandment I give unto you: this is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you'.

Now why is John labouring this point? Well, simply because these Docetists, these false teachers were parading their new knowledge as a new revelation. John is coming along, and he's saying: 'What I've to teach, it isn't new. What I've to teach is the authentic teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He summed up everything that the law and the prophets taught, and He said 'Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself' - as Jude put it, it was the faith once delivered unto the saints. I'm telling you today, in this neo-evangelical, charismatic age: you need to be careful of anyone who comes along and says, 'I've something new to tell you that is not found in the scripture'. We don't need anything new in that sense, because we have the old commandment from the beginning. But what John
Pastor David Legge

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Now how is it new? Is this a contradiction? Well, he said, of course, himself in John's gospel that it was a new commandment. I believe what he's talking about is that this is a commandment in the Old Testament to love your neighbour, but the Lord Jesus Christ, as He comes upon the scene, He brings a new characteristic to this love and to this command: for in Christ it is the first time that that agape love of God has been perfectly and completely exemplified. That's why he says in verse 8: 'that thing is true in him' - this love is perfected in the personification of Christ as the divine Son. Then he goes on to say that this is a new commandment, never been seen before as it has now in Christ, but in the very present tense John says that this love is a new commandment seen in you, verse 8. In other words, this love that was in Christ is meant to be true in believers in John's day and in our day. This is the miracle of conversion, these Ephesians, other Christians in the early church, who in heathendom were ruled by passion and hatred and pride, by the grace of God have now been transformed and are displaying in their lives a new commandment that has never been seen in this light before - they're loving one another, when once they were hating each other.

That's what he means when he says at the end of verse 8, that in this the darkness, literally the tense is 'is passing away'. Through these conversions of pagans the darkness, the natural darkness that we've all been born into, enmity with God and our fellow men, is passing away. Now it isn't completely passed yet, but when people are converted and show love toward one another, that's what he says in verse 8: 'the true light shineth' - or the tense is, 'is already shining'. Do you have that love? Is there something that marks you out as a Christian, and it is your love for brethren and sisters in Christ and other people in this world? That is the test - it's not just all about obeying God's commands very coldly and in a matter of fact way, but it's about having a love that is like the love of Jesus, never to fail or fade.

Maybe you're saying tonight: 'David, what is that true love?'. Well, John gives us its definition in verses 9 to 11, and he contrasts between two loves: the true love and the false. In verse 9, the third 'He that saith', he says: 'He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now'. In other words, it doesn't matter, talk is cheap: if you profess with your mouth to know Christ and walk in the light, yet you hate your brother, that is a sure sign that you are in darkness until now. Please don't miss the import of such a statement. That expression 'in darkness until now', it's not talking about just that sin has come like a cloud between you and God, and your fellowship has been interrupted for a moment or two. It doesn't even mean that you've backslidden to some extent. Literally that statement 'in darkness until now' means that the man continues to be what he has always been - unregenerate! Unconverted! Without the life of God in his being, cut off from God! That's what it means. Hatred is a sign and characteristic of our natural darkness.

Then, to show us what this true love is in contrast to the false, in verse 10 he tells us: 'He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him'. The one who truly loves his brother with authentic love, the true Christian, abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. Now that could mean two things, 'no cause for stumbling in him'. It could mean that he doesn't stumble himself, and I believe that that is the true sense of the verse. In other words, listen to me: if you believe the doctrinal truth about who Christ is, and you've passed the test and you've believed the true gospel, and you have trusted Christ's blood, confessed your sins, He has cleansed you; and you have passed the moral test, you're being obedient to God's word and, though you fail Him from time to
time, there is within your heart an habitual desire to please the Lord; and you've passed the social test, you're loving your brother even though he offends you from time to time - I'm telling you, someone like that, there's less chance of them stumbling into sin and backsliding than another brother who fails all those tests.

The second meaning of 'there is no cause of stumbling in him' could be that he will not be the cause of stumbling to others. In other words, if you're teaching the right truths about Christ you're not going to lead somebody astray. If you're living by God's commandments yourself, you're not going to be a bad example to another. If you're loving your brethren in all circumstances, no matter who they are and how unlikeable they may be at times, you're going to win people for Christ, you're not going to be a stumbling block to others. This has weighed heavy on my heart today as I've been studying God's word - do you know why? Because I believe, from my own personal experience mingling among people and talking to unconverted folk, that one of the greatest hindrances to people coming to Christ in this day and in every day is those who claim to be Christians yet don't live up to the name. Am I talking to you tonight? Now be warned this evening: if you take the name of Christ and hate your brother, you're in darkness! You're not saved! Indeed, verse 11 says this: 'You know not whither you go or come', as it were, 'because darkness has blinded your eyes'. Hating another, what it leads to is more and more darkness. Whilst there are signs given in this book of how we can be assured that we are authentic Christians, this is a categorical statement that if we hate our brother we can know that we are not a child of God.

So we have looked at these two tests of our authentic Christianity, and they are the practical ones of Christianity. The moral test: obedience to the word, both keeping His word and walking His walk. Secondly the social test: loving your brother. Now can I sum all this up by saying this, very simply, that these two tests can be concluded in one word: it is simply the word 'Christlikeness'. The Lord Jesus Christ claimed that that the law and the prophets were summed up in Him. We see in His life love like we've never seen in any character in all of history and even in the Bible. We see in the Lord Jesus God's law and God's agape love in perfect harmony together, unlike the claims of evangelicals today who say that to have law is legalism, and legalists often say that to have love is licence - whereas in Christ we see these two gelled together in perfect harmony. But here is the challenge to us tonight: how ought we to live as practical Christians? We ought to walk as He walked! What is it? It is Christlikeness! Now, I know you can only live it by the Spirit, you can only live it when you lie low, you die to yourself and reckon yourself dead with Christ on the cross, and alive unto God through the new nature. I know all that, but my question is: are you living it? Christlikeness: how Christlike are you? Or are you, God forbid, and I'm sure there's one or more in the meeting tonight, a stumbling block to others coming to Christ, or to your brother or sister advancing and growing in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ?

How did the Saviour walk, and how ought we to walk? He walked in faith. The Bible says the Son can do nothing of Himself. Now we're entering into a very mysterious and holy piece of Scriptural ground, where in the humanity of Christ, the Lord Jesus did not lose any of His divine attributes, but voluntarily He chose not to use them. He chose to live as a man among men, He chose to depend as a man completely on His Heavenly Father and not what He could do. Here we see Him walking in faith, He submitted Himself to His Father's will, even to the extent of being obedient unto death - Philippians 2 says 'even the death of the cross', and you know what that meant! Do you walk by faith? Do you walk in total dependence upon your Heavenly Father? He walked in the word, He never doubted for one moment its authority, and He never accepted the authority of another over it. Even when the devil himself in Matthew 4 came and tempted Him, doubting God's word, He said three times 'It is written, it is written, it
is written’. His answer to every challenge was: 'I do always the things that please Him'. He said to His disciples, and He says to us tonight: 'Walk as I walk. If you love me, keep my commandments'.

He walked in faith, He walked in the word, He walked in prayer. Can you see Him getting up in the dead of night and walking through the household and out into the street, and up the mountain into a solitary place and praying all night long before His Father? Can you see Him getting up a great while before day, and going into the wilderness and praying to God? Do you see Him withdrawing Himself from the crowd? There were people to heal, disciples to teach, but He needed to draw strength from His Heavenly Father. Do you walk in prayer?

These are the signs of a Christian. He walked in good works. Oh, you'll not get saved by good works - but a sure sign that you are saved is that, like Him, you will go about doing good, you will please not yourself, and you will lay down your life for the brethren and for those around you in the world who are dying without hope. Do you know what this epistle teaches us? That the purpose of the church in John's day and in ours, and the purpose of the individual Christian is to exhibit the real presence of Christ in this world. That is done by obedience and by love.

Now I hate these wee bangles with 'WWJD' on them, but I like the message: 'What would Jesus do?'. That is a profound message. You can dispensationalise it all you like, but it doesn't avoid the fact that in John's dispensation, which is ours, He teaches that we ought to walk even as He walked. The message of God's salvation is not just about chapter 1, it's not just about the blood that was shed and the cleansing that's available through confession, but it's about this fact: that God is so pleased with His own Son that He wants a whole company of people walking about heaven like Him one day.

How like Him are you now? A sculptor once fashioned a lion out of a block of granite, and he was asked how he accomplished such a wonderful masterpiece. He replied: 'Oh, it was easy, all I did was to chip away everything that didn't look like a lion'. Are you chipping away the things in your life that are not Christlike? Are you being conformed more and more, by the Spirit's help I agree, but are you getting there, progressing to be more like Christ? If that's the reason you've been saved, that's the reason the church exists, what kind of picture of Christ do you give to other people?

'If of Jesus Christ their only view,  
May be what they see of Him in you,  
My soul, what do they see?'

Someone put it this way: 'God has a surname. He is called the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob'. Hebrews 11, incidentally, and verse 16 says: 'He is not ashamed to be called their God' - but I wonder how God would feel having your surname this evening? 'The God of David' - put your name in there! My friends, I ask you: our sole duty on the earth is to exhibit Christ to our brethren and sisters and to a world that is dying, and is this not the very thing that we're failing in? I know we couldn't help but do anything else, for we all fall short of the glory of God - but I'm asking: is anything of Christ seen in my life and yours? James Spink said: 'More evil is done to the cause of Christianity by its adherents than its opponents'. Oh, we're touching sore spots tonight, but this is really where the rubber meets the road. Even in Hudson Taylor's days in the 1800s, he said: 'The inconsistencies of Christian people who, while professing to believe their Bibles, were yet content', in his day, 'to live just as if there was no such book'. He says: 'That was one of the strongest arguments of my sceptical
companions' - nothing has changed! You witness to someone and they just point to a Christian, or to a church, and they say: 'Look at them! If that's what Christianity is, I don't want anything to do with it!'. I know we piously say: 'Och, but don't look at Christians, look at Christ' - my friend, they're meant to be looking at Christ in us!

George Duncan tells a story of a businessman - now not all businessmen are like this! - who was involved in a Christian broadcast on a previous evening. A girl that was employed by him heard it. Of course, the next morning he was in a very bad mood, and things were not going well for him or the girl. For some reason the girl seemed to get the brunt of it all and the benefit of his temper, and as she went out of the office she said to another girl coming in: 'That's right, come to Jesus on Sunday night, and go to hell on Monday morning'. Now listen: that's the way many unbelievers see Christians today. Can I ask you: are you a bitter, prickly, so-called Christian? Do you take offence at the smallest things? Do you maintain religiously a long memory of wrongs against you? Do you have an unforgiving spirit? Are you paralysed with spite and resentment? John says you need to look into your heart and question whether you're really a child of God, because that is a sign of characteristic natural darkness of a man or woman who has never been saved.

Isn't it ironic that today it's those who claim at times, just like the Docetists, to have a superior knowledge of God, they're the 'holier than thou' crowd, who are constantly in conflict with other believers and other people in our world - isn't that often the way? It's very hard to get a person that has, like the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, both grace and truth. It was Robert Candlish who said over a century ago: 'A selfish religionist is sure to become either morbid or stupid. It is by sympathy and brotherhood that the fire of personal Christianity is fanned'. One other man has said: 'The light in a man is darkness until it is warmed by love'. I don't care how much of the Bible you know, I really don't care - it's important to have a knowledge, but if it's without love, it's nothing! I don't believe in a 'second blessing', but there's some Christians could do with a baptism of fire and love!

Words are cheap, anyone can say anything. Maybe you're here tonight, and you haven't experienced much love in the Christian church to which you belong. How many walls of church buildings have heard the accusation: 'There's no fellowship in this place anyway, there's no love here'? But do you know what we all need to do? If we keep doing that and looking to other people, we'll get nowhere: we need to look at ourselves. We need to look at the lack of love that may be in my heart, the lack of forgiveness that may be in my breast. One very profound proverb in Proverbs 18:24 is this: 'A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly'. As one put it in verse:

'I went out to find a friend,
And found none there.
I went out to be a friend,
And found them everywhere'.

Look at your own heart tonight, don't look to the pew in front of you, to the front of the church, the other side, don't think of your own home church and the people that have offended you there - don't think of it, look in your own heart, my friend! Remember that the love of God was an unconditional love. God never waited until you were up to speed, and then He says: 'OK, I'll forgive you, don't do anything more again'. Oh, it was a gracious love. Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying tonight: does this mean that Christians can't disagree? Of course they can, they do, and they should. Does it mean that Christians can't be angry? Of course it doesn't, we are to be angry and sin not. It doesn't even mean that emotions of
dissent among believers must be repressed, they must be expressed at times. What it does mean is that there should be no disagreement that should take a leap to the point of hate or a schism between the fellowship of two believers, because, my friend, there's more at stake than human pride! It is the very name of Christ and His image in the world today!

You have heard the quip: 'Actions speak louder than words', and that's exactly what John is saying. Robert Chapman was one of the early Brethren, and he set before himself this great aim, and I quote his words, he said: 'Seeing so many preach Christ, and so few live Christ, I will aim to live Christ'. Christ was preached from many pulpits in our land yesterday, and many adorned a suit, had a Bible under their arm, called themselves Christ's ones, even sat at His table, and many of them were evangelical - but who, today, is living Christ? John Nelson Darby said of R.C. Chapman: 'He lives what I teach'. Are you living Christ, my friend? Speaking of William Arnott, a friend of his said: 'His preaching was good, his writing was better, but his life was best of all'. One who only spent a night in the presence of Murray M'Cheyne said: 'Oh, that is the most Jesus-like man I ever saw!'.

What will they say of you when you're dead and gone? What will they say of me? 'He was principled', 'He was dogmatic', or 'He was Christlike'? We've only got one shot at it, only one life, only one chance - and remember that sin caused our first parents in the Garden that broken fellowship to run away and hide from God, and it still causes us to hide from God. But what I want you to see tonight is that it causes us to hide from our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we run from them! Roy Hession puts it like this - I started with a quote and I'll finish with one - 'Sin always involves us in being unreal'. Hiding, pretending, duplicity, windowdressing, excusing ourselves, blaming others - and we can do all that as much by our silence, as by saying or doing something. That is what John calls 'walking in darkness'. Just as we're not to hide our sins from God, we're to bring them into the light; we're not to hide our sins from our brothers and sisters in Christ, we're to bring them into the light too.

The moral test is obedience to the Word. The social test is to love our brother - but both of them can be summarised in this word 'Christlikeness'. How like the Lord Jesus Christ are you my friend? This is what God wants, this is what the church and the world needs. How are you? How do you measure up to His frame?

R.W. DeHann wrote of a missionary who, shortly after arriving on the field, was speaking for the first time to a group of villagers. He was trying to present the gospel to them. He began by describing the Lord Jesus Christ, and he referred to Him as a man who was compassionate and kind, loving, caring, one who went about doing good towards all men. When he was speaking, he noticed that his lesson brought smiles of familiarity to the faces of his audience, and some of them nodded their heads to one another in agreement. He was somewhat puzzled, and he interrupted his message to ask: 'Do you know who I'm talking about?'. One of the villagers quickly responded: 'Yes, we do. You're talking about a man who used to come here'. Eagerly they told about a missionary doctor who came to their remote village to minister to their physical needs, and his life was so like Christ in caring for those people that they saw Jesus in him. He walked even as Jesus walked: that is practical Christianity.

Can two walk together except they be agreed? Will you agree to walk with Him tonight? Bring out those sins that you're hiding between you and God, bring out before your brother or sister those sins that you're hiding towards them, and I'll tell you this: you will know revival in your soul.
Lord, that is our prayer, we can put it in no better words other than that you would make the mind of Christ our Saviour live in us from day-to-day, by His love and His power controlling all I do and say. Lord, make us like the Lord Jesus Christ we pray, for nothing else will do, nothing else will satisfy our souls or bring revival to our churches or bring an awakening to our world, other than being like Jesus. In His name we pray, Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - November 2005
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We're turning to 1 John again and chapter 2, our title for this evening's study - it is our sixth study - and the title is 'The Christian And The World', and we begin our reading at verse 12 of the second chapter.

"I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever".

William MacDonald in his Bible commentary has a very helpful outline of this little book, as he does of course with all the books, particularly those of the New Testament. He points out that in chapter 1 and verse 5, through to chapter 2 verse 2 that we studied in our second study in this series, we have the means of maintaining fellowship with God. It is through the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that cleanseth all our sins that we can enter into fellowship with God. That blood is applied to us when we confess our sins, and then He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Our continual coming in fellowship with God is made possible by, as he says in chapter 2 verse 2, the fact that we have One in heaven who is not only the propitiation for our sins, but the sins of the whole world, and as verse one says: 'If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'. So that is our means of fellowship, and maintaining fellowship with the Lord God. If sin comes in and interrupts, we ought not ever to say that we do not have sin, or that we have not sinned, but we must agree with God that our sin is as He has said, and bring it into the light and allow Him to, afresh, bring us into fellowship again.

Then after showing the means of maintaining fellowship, we have in chapter 2 and verses 3-11 the marks of those who are in the Christian fellowship. How do you know if you are indeed a Christian? How do you get that assurance? How do you recognise other Christians? We were given those two tests last week in verses 3 to 11, and they were: obedience to the Lord's commands, and love to the brethren and to those around us.

Now this week we're looking at verses 12 through to 14 first of all, as John personally addresses individual members within this church - and this, of course, is a circular letter going to other churches, but he is speaking now to the members, and members who are at different stages of growth in fellowship. Then we'll see a little bit later on in our meeting from verses 15 to 17, and later on next week, God willing, through to verse 28: he outlines two great dangers that threaten the fellowship that we have with God and with each other. We'll only
have time this week to look at the first, and that is: the world. God willing, next week we'll look at the false teachers which he writes about in verse 18 following.

So let's look first of all at verses 12 to 14, and he addresses the members in the fellowship. Really, those whom he addresses, if you look at it, it embraces the whole family of God with this one expression in verse 12: 'Little children' - 'I write unto you, little children'. Now you will note, if you look down at verse 13, that he addresses 'little children' again just at the end of that verse. Now, in the Greek language there are two different words that are used for 'little children', and that isn't shown really in our English translations - it can't be. But the word that is used in verse 12 that we're looking at first of all literally means 'offspring of any age'. So, when it speaks of children, it doesn't mean 'little infants', or even adolescents, but it's not speaking about age or experience, rather it is talking about, in a generic sense, how we are the offspring of God no matter what age we are. In other words, it's speaking of those who have been regenerated by the Spirit, those who have been partakers of the new nature through the new birth.

You might say, 'Well, so what, what does that really matter?'. Well, it matters a great deal, because there are those in our world today, even in religious circles, who believe in the universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man. I'm sure you've heard this, that God is everyone's Father, and that we are everyone's brother and sister in humanity because we all own God as our Father. It becomes very popular, especially in the ecumenical movement and in syncretistic religion - trying to say that all roads lead to God because God is everyone's Father, and so we're all brothers and sisters in humanity. But this word right away tells us that John is addressing those who are the offspring of God, and the inference is that there are those who are not the offspring of God. Right away he is setting down a demarcation line that we find right throughout the whole of Scripture, and particularly in the New Testament: that God sees in this world not one great humanity with Him at the head, but two families that exist. There are, as the Lord Jesus Christ put it, those who are the children of Satan - remember He said to the scribes and Pharisees: 'Ye are of your father the devil' - then there are those who are the children of God.

Now the great question is posed: how do you get into God's family? Well, if God is to be your Father, then you must be His son; and if you are to be His son, then He must have given birth to you at some time - you must be born of God. That is simply what the doctrine, biblically speaking, the evangelical doctrine of the new birth teaches. It's not about simply making a decision, although that may be part of it in your own volition, but this is something that comes from heaven itself. A man or a woman who comes to faith in Christ does not essentially come to the Saviour in conversion just on the earth at some kind of evangelistic crusade, but there is actually some transaction that has taken place in heaven, that has caused them to give birth to the very life of God in their soul. Let's never forget that! Christianity is not just 'deciding to follow Jesus', although it is that - but there is a supernatural element whereby God's very life, by His Spirit, is breathed into us...and that's how you become a son or a daughter of God. That's why the Lord Jesus was at great pains in John chapter 3 to tell Nicodemus several times: 'Nicodemus, you must be born again'.

Now do you remember that the theme of this epistle not only is fellowship but assurance? Some of them were starting to doubt whether or not they were the sons and daughters of God. You might say: 'Well, how do I know if I am one of these people that are the offspring of God, whatever age I may come into?'. Well, he tells us in verse 12: 'I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake'. People who are born-again and know God are people who know that their sins are forgiven. Now that doesn't mean if
you're doubting that your sins are forgiven, you're not saved, but if you want to get assurance: well, you need to know that the sins and the debt that you have toward God in transgressing His law has been wiped clean by the blood of Christ. Now I wonder could it be that there's someone in the meeting tonight, and you're not sure about that? It could very well be that you're not sure because it hasn't happened! You may be religious, you may even consider yourself evangelical, but you've never had that new birth experience. You might have had a simulation of it, you might have been pushed into some kind of decision on a human level by another Christian or even an evangelist. You might have put your hand up, you may have prayed a prayer, but the great question is: do you know the new birth in your heart? Do you know that your sins are forgiven you?

Here's one clue as to how you do know: it will always be 'for His name's sake'. Verse 12, at the end, our sins: 'are forgiven for His name's sake' - that is the ground of our forgiveness, that is the ground upon which God can bring us into new life through the new birth. We are born-again! Are you born-again? We are forgiven of your sins? Well, if you have on both of those counts, it will simply be because you're resting on Calvary's work. Do you understand? You see, you can't earn forgiveness of sins in your own right, but you must be able to say with the hymn writer:

"I need no other argument,  
I need no other plea,  
It is enough that Jesus died,  
And that He died for me".

I'm resting on His work, His completed atonement at the cross. Isn't it wonderful to have that assurance tonight? Isn't it? But if we were to ask specifically: who are these members in the fellowship that John is addressing? Who are these people that he refers to in verse 13 as 'fathers', as 'young men', and then again as 'little children'? Well, there's divergence of opinion - which should never surprise you in biblical matters! - on this particular interpretation, and there are some who say: 'Well, these three designations are just different words for the whole family. He's trying in a literary scheme to encompass everyone in this particular church because, let's face it, some of the traits that are in each of these people that he commends them for are traits that should be in us all as believers'. There is a point here - one author says: 'All believers should be children in innocence, and dependent on their Heavenly Father. Young men we should be in our strength, and we all should be fathers in our experience with God'. Whilst that may well be the ideal what we should all be, it is far from the reality, I'm sure you'll agree. So I don't think that John is addressing everyone when he designates these three types of people.

Then there are others who say, secondly: 'Well, he's talking to three different age groups, and that's self evident by the fact that he talks about elderly people, or older people, in fathers; then he talks about young men; and then he talks about little children or infants'. People push this interpretation to say that what he's actually getting at in speaking to fathers, he's talking to those who are experienced in the things of God. When he talks to these young men, because he commends them for their strength, that's what he's trying to highlight - strength, courage in the things of God. When he talks to these little children, he's speaking to folk who are immature in the faith, they've come to Christ recently and they haven't grown like these other two types of people. Now that may well be the case in part, but it would be wrong to say that these characteristics, whilst common to fathers and young men and to little children, are exclusive.
What do I mean? Let me explain myself: just because you're a father in an age sense, it does not necessarily follow that you're experienced in the things of God. Just because you're a young man does not mean necessarily that you're strong, courageous in the things of God, and that you're overcoming the evil one. Neither does it necessarily mean that if you're young in the faith and only come to Christ recently, that you're naive or even a babe in Christ up to now. Some of these things overlap, so I think that in these three groups of people that John is addressing he is outlining specific stages of spiritual growth in God's family. Now the fathers may well be older people, and the young men may well be young men, and the little children may well be infants, but I believe he's talking about stages in fellowship that we can have in the things of God - and I don't believe, sisters, that he's excluding the females just because he talks in the male gender.

So let's look first of all at the 'fathers', and we'll group together everything he says about each group even though they're scattered over these two verses. First of all he speaks to the fathers in verse 13: 'I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning'. Now it may well be that these fathers were elders, very seldom are elders called 'fathers', but the likelihood is that at least some of them, if not all of them, were elders in the church. They were the most mature, not in age now, but in their spiritual experience of God. When you look at this verse he commends them because they have 'known him', probably referring to the Lord Jesus, 'that is from the beginning' - because in the first couple of verses of this epistle, that's who he talks about when he speaks of having fellowship with Him who was from the beginning. He commends these fathers for their experience in the things of God. Now, that doesn't come with age - it often does carry with age - but because you're older doesn't necessarily mean that you've been experienced in the things of God, but these men had.

Let me say this, and this is to those who are elders in this church and other churches, and those who are fathers even in a chronological sense of how many years you've totted up: the pinnacle of spiritual maturity is to know God experientially. Do you understand that? Whilst it is commendable to have a great knowledge of the Scriptures, and whilst it is good to have experience of life, the fact of the matter is: to be a father in the faith you need to know God through your own personal experience - to know God in all His fullness! Isn't that what Paul said in Philippians and chapter 3 verse 10: 'That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death'. Now I ask you the question: is that how we accredit elders in the church? Often the reason we qualify them is because they have a knowledge of Scripture, or they even are apt to teach, they can preach a little bit: but these fathers needed to know God! Fathers in the faith! Now how many of those are around? We've got men who can turn you to the verses, but how many have we that have experienced the reality of those spiritual verses in their own experience, and can point you to have the right experiences in Christ also? It also entails that they need to be a good example to the flock, they need to discipline the flock as a father, they need to have also tender compassion. 'Fathers, I write unto you because ye have known him that is from the beginning'. Elder, you could say a lot about yourself tonight, but can you say, can I say: 'I know him'?

Then secondly, he addresses this group who are called 'young men'. Whilst they may not have been fathers in the experience that they had of Him who was from the beginning, like the first group, one thing is for sure: they are strong against sin and against doctrinal error. 'I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one', and then if you look at verse 14 in the middle, 'I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one'. They have the word of
God in them, and that is the key! These young men, whilst they may not have the experiential knowledge of the word, they know the word and they know the doctrine - they know how to recognise error. They are vehemently opposed against every form of sin and iniquity!

Now, young people who are in our meeting tonight, is that not extremely encouraging to you in this particular day? So often when we read the word of God, and we read the biographies of great giants of the faith in church history, and then we look at our own environment in which we live and which we are growing up in and finding our feet, we can often despair thinking: 'It is impossible to live a life of godliness and purity in such a wicked world as this' - but, praise God, it is not impossible! John's world was not a stone's throw from our world this very evening, and yet he was able to commend young men in the faith because they had overcome the wicked one, because God's word abided in them. Isn't that wonderful? Not only fathers in the faith can be exemplars in the faith, but so can young men and young women - they can be examples in godliness, just as Timothy himself was. These young people had overcome the wiles of the devil himself morally, because the word of God dwelt in them, they believed it, they lived it out, and they faced false doctrine and sin and error - they overcame the devil himself. Morally, they had the victory; morally, they were triumphant; morally, they were overcoming - is that you today, young person?

The Psalmist asked the question that young people of every age asked, Psalm 119 and verse 9: 'Wherewithal shall a young man', or a young woman, 'cleanse his way?'. Then in verse 11 he tells us: '...by taking heed thereto according to thy word', verse 11, 'thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee'. That is the secret of these young men who overcame the devil in their age, and it'll be the secret of all young people who overcome this wicked world today: the word of God in your heart, and using it in your life! Morally they overcame, doctrinally they overcame all the false doctrine that was round about. You see, this is the mark of the difference between a young man in the faith, and a child or someone who is still an infant or a babe in Christ. Indeed, when we turn to Ephesians chapter 4 Paul, in another context in verse 14, says: 'Henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive'. Sometimes you meet young people, and this week they believe one doctrine, the next week they believe another doctrine, and they're just blown to and fro depending on who the popular teacher of the moment is. That's not the way we are to be: morally we're to stand fast with the word of God in us, living it out; but we're to have the word of God in our head, knowing doctrine that is true and false.

These young men - God give us more of them! - were overcomers doctrinally as well as morally. I can't put it any better than John Bunyan did when he said: 'This book will keep you from sin, and sin will keep you from this book'. That's the bottom line, and the sooner young people and older people realise this, that this is the secret to Christian success, the better your experience of the Christian life will be. Now I have a great concern about young people in our age, and sometimes from the pulpit young people are hammered and hammered again and again, and I don't think it's always fair because what's often hammered in young people could well be hammered in older people - and this is one particular aspect. It's this: that they don't seem to have, as used to be, an appetite for the word of God. Praise God for you that are here that are young people, and I'm not hammering the ones that are faithful and have come tonight! But the fact of the matter is: there is a decreasing knowledge among young people of the Scriptures. No matter how you want to measure it, I believe it's a fact. You don't seem to get young men that will sit down any more, flick through the pages and even argue over the Scriptures - which isn't always a bad thing, sharpening one another's sword. There is this laissez-faire attitude that: 'Well, it doesn't really matter, as long as you love the
Lord' - but I'll tell you this: if you don't know the word of God, you'll never overcome the wicked one! You'll not do it!

Ephesians chapter 6 tells us that this book is the sword of the Spirit, it's the only offensive weapon that we have against the forces of evil. It doesn't matter whether you're a father in the age sense, or a young man, the fact of the matter is: whether you have the adolescent youth within you or the strength of young manhood, Isaiah says in Isaiah 40 that even the youths shall faint and grow weary, but it is them that wait on the Lord who shall renew their strength. Old or young, it's around this book, it's on your knees, it's before your God - only then can you overcome the wicked one!

Fathers, young men, young women, then thirdly he addresses the little children again. Now, as I pointed out earlier the 'little children' here in this particular verse 13, is a different 'little children' than verse 12, and it basically speaks of those in a young sense of the faith, those who are babes in Christ, those who have recently come to awareness of God and who need to do a bit of growing. Now that's natural, that's not something to be looked down on. In fact, Peter tells us that we are to desire the pure milk of the word as newborn babes desire their mother's milk. You don't set a wee baby down to a T-bone steak, you give them a bottle; and gradually it grows. Everything's new when you first come to faith in Christ or come back to the Lord again, as the hymn says, even the heaven above is softer blue, the earth around is sweeter green, something lives in every hue Christless eyes have never seen. But if that wee baby, after one year of life on this earth, didn't grow - well, I think you'd be taking it to the doctor, wouldn't you, with a heart breaking with great anxiety for the welfare and the future of your child. It is a tragedy. You know, it is a tragedy when one of God's newborn babes does not grow - and Paul had to come to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 3:1, and say to them: 'Ye are still babes! I want to feed you with meat, but I have to feed you with milk. You're carnal, you think you know everything, but you know nothing!'.

Basically, babes need to grow up, all of them do. But I wonder is there someone here tonight, and you have stunted growth? You should have grown up a long time ago. Or is this starting to test your faith, even as we speak, it's starting to rock your assurance because maybe the signs of life are not even there! When the baby is born, often what the physician will do is move its hand across its face to see if there's any reactions, tap its bones at certain reflex points, and if there's no signs of life what other conclusion can they come to but that they are dead? If there's no development in your Christian experience, what other conclusion can you come to?

Well, the good news about why John, I believe, addresses these three groups - fathers, young men, little children - is because John had time for everybody in the family of God. I think that's beautiful. Here's why it's beautiful: because these false teachers and heretics, these Docetists and the forerunners of the Gnostics who claimed some kind of elite knowledge of God that only came through a special revelation to certain highbrow individuals, they were saying: 'Well, you have to be top-notch, you have to be one of the elite, you have to get up there, there's no room for the babes, there's no room for the young men, it's only the elite who can know God'. John says: 'No, I write to the fathers, I write to the young men, I even right to the little children' - isn't that wonderful? There's no ageism with God. Sometimes I'm concerned - and I don't wish to criticise other churches, I've no place to do that - but there are churches that are 'Young people's churches', then there's churches that are 'Old people's churches' - and we're glad we have a bit of a 'dolly mixture' here in this church. There are churches that are 'black churches' and churches that are 'white churches', but the beauty of what God wanted when He was thinking out the plan of salvation and the miracle of the
mystery of the church was that there be no divisions, and all ages, and all classes, and all races, and all peoples would be able to be together!

Sometimes the old folk can look down at the young ones. Some of you want them to be old folk and won't allow them to be young folk, when the old folk, when you were young folk, allowed you to be young folk - are you following me? Some of the young folk want to take the whole thing by the reins and run away, and they want to sing hymns all the time that none of the old folk know - and that's not on either! Why can't we live together, as God meant us to live together? But John's point is this: no matter what age these people were, no matter what stage they were at as members in the church, every single one of them from the fathers right down to the little children manifested something of Christ's character somewhere. The question is: do you?

Those are the members in the fellowship, but then secondly he talks to them about a danger to the fellowship. As I said, in verse 18 following, God willing, next week we'll look at the second one of these, the false teachers. But first of all he deals with the first danger to church fellowship and our fellowship with God individually in verse 15, he says: 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world'. Now you will know that all of John's epistles have the great theme of love right throughout them, none less than 1 John itself, and we have already looked at that in great detail in recent weeks. But here we have John showing that there is a negative aspect to love. You don't often hear this in the day and age in which we live, everything seems to be positive even in Christian circles, but here is a negative side to love. Of course, this stands to reason when you think about it for a moment, because a Christian at the one and the same time cannot love God and love the devil, that would be ridiculous. A Christian cannot love righteousness and sin, indeed the Lord Jesus articulated it in the Sermon on the Mount when He said: 'You cannot serve two masters, ye cannot serve God and mammon'. The Psalmist put it in Psalm 97: 'Ye that love the Lord, hate evil' - that is the other side of love for God, it is a hate for evil things. Paul said in Romans 12: 'Abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good'. Good and evil, God and Satan, holiness and worldliness, are mutually incompatible - do you understand that? James articulated it, perhaps in a very forthright manner, when he said in James 4:4: 'Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God'.

Now some people right away say: 'Well, here is one of the contradictions of the Bible. I always knew they were there, and preachers said to me, 'Where are they? Show us the contradictions', well here's one because I know John 3:16 which says 'For God so loved the world', and the word he uses for 'world', 'cosmos', is the same word that you have 23 times in this first epistle of John. How can God love the world and then tell His own followers not to love the world?'. Well, let's find out what this word 'world' actually means. Of course, it means different things in different contexts, and the word 'cosmos' is used with different meanings at times throughout the New Testament. First of all it can mean 'the material world', the actual soil of the earth, the whole of creation. We see that clearly, and right throughout scripture there is an agreement that God created all things good, God does not hate this world as a material entity - though we live in a fallen creation, He still glories in the wonder of the sky and the hills and the trees and all of nature. Then secondly this word is used in a racial sense, and I believe that's how it's used in John 3:16 - for God so loved the whole world, all peoples. Then thirdly, the way it's used here is that it speaks of the world system, 'Love not the world system'.
What is the world system? Well, the world system is the system which man has built up in an effort to make himself happy, satisfied, fulfilled apart from God. One person has defined it like this: 'Human society is the world system in so far as it is organised in wrong principles, characterised by base desires, false values and egoism'. In short, the world system is any sphere where the Lord Jesus is not loved, and the Lord Jesus is not welcomed. Does that define it for you? Well, worldliness, the ideal, poses another question for us which is a very contemporary one, particularly among young people today - simply this: 'What is it?'. It's bandied about in prayer meetings and from pulpits. In conversations people, sometimes older people, are saying: 'Oh, the church is getting so worldly' - but many people are at pains to define what worldliness means? What is it in practical terms? There's a great dispute regarding it.

Now let me say what worldliness, and to hate the world, is not. To hate the world, and to live a non-worldly life, is not first of all: Pharisaism. Pharisaism was what was around in our Lord's day: those who were religious and tried to be non-worldly by adhering to particular religious rules and rituals. Now the problem with legalism was that, though they had many right rules, they had not the life of God in their breast to live up to the rules. They hadn't the new birth, and the outcome of that was that it led to hypocrisy, because when you have rules but don't have the power to obey the rules, you portray the facade that you are obeying it, when with the heart and even in actions secretly you're transgressing your own rules. To hate the world, to love not the world as John says, is not Pharisaism - and there is quite a lot of Pharisaism in evangelical Christianity, particularly in Ulster.

Secondly, it is not asceticism. What is asceticism? Well, the ascetics were people who denied the fleshly appetites - sexually, with food, with drink, with rest, with any form of physical sensual pleasure. Now, what was the problem with that? This is how they decided they would become non-worldly - well, the problem is that these things are not necessarily wrong. Sensual pleasure is natural in certain areas. God, in fact, created some of these things, they were instituted before the fall of man, and God put His blessing on it - because of that, asceticism leads to frustration, because you're trying to dull certain things that God has given you which are good. It doesn't work either.

Thirdly, to love not the world does not mean monasticism. What is that? Well, you've heard of monks, hermits, they withdrew themselves from the world. They thought: 'If we get away from all the externalities that are tempting us, and hide ourselves and be alone with God, well, we'll be free from the world'. John Stott calls it 'Rabbit-hole religiosity'. There are a lot of 'rabbit hole' Christians about, they only put their head above the parapet when they go out to the Sunday meeting, and then they come back in. They only hang around with Christians and they only talk with Christians. You see, there's a danger in this ghetto mentality, because it actually prevents us loving the lost the way that God Himself describes in John 3:16. The great problem with monasticism regarding hating the world and becoming non-worldly, is that the greater problem is not so much external factors in the world, but the fact that the external things in the world find an echo with my old wicked evil heart - and that's what you take with you when you go into a monastery or a convent, and inevitably it leads to failure.

So, what is it to hate the world? People want specifics: 'Go on, tell them what's right, tell them what's wrong'. If you want to ask me privately about things, I will do that, but you know I don't need to say that from the pulpit. I'll tell you why: because the principles are clearly defined within the Scriptures of what is worldly and what is not, and it would be impossible for God to define specifics in a book that is timeless. He does better than that, He shows us, no matter how cultures change and trends change, the principles whereby we may know what is
worldliness and what is holiness. Where are they? Well, they're in verse 16: 'All that is in the world', first of all, here's the first sign of worldliness, 'the lust of the flesh'. That's a definition of worldliness. What is the lust of the flesh? Well, it is gratifying sensual bodily appetites and desires of our evil nature. Now, bodily appetites are natural, they are God-given; but because of the fall of humanity they have been perverted, and by our own fallen nature inside they have been perverted also. The problem comes when the world tempts us to fulfil normal appetites and desires in abnormal ways, that's when the lust of the flesh comes on the field.

What am I talking about? Well, when the world tries to take hunger and turn it into gluttony, that is the lust of the flesh. When the world tries to take thirst and turns it into drunkenness, when it takes sleep and turns it into sloth and laziness, when it takes sex and turns it into fornication and adultery and immorality and sodomy - that is the lust of the flesh. Now if you're involved in any of those things in any shape or form, that is a sign whether or not you are worldly, that is worldliness! He goes on to define it a little bit more: 'the lust of the eyes', evil desires that arise from what we see. A prime example is David eyeing up Bathsheba, and that was the primary sin that led to the actual physical sin of adultery. Have you ever said to anybody - maybe when you were serving them a meal - 'Feast your eyes upon that'? That is the lust of the eyes, not in a true sense, but that's the idea that you're feasting your eyes on something that is ungodly and sinful. Sometimes you get up from the table and you say: 'My eyes were bigger than my belly' - don't you? That's the same idea: you're feeding on things that are unhelpful.

We live in a media dominated world, and the world's axis seems to spin today on the lust of the eyes, and TV adverts appeal to the eye: 'Drink this beer, and you'll get the best looking girl in the bunch', 'Drive this car, and you'll get the best job, you'll be a hero and all the rest'. We have a 'must have' mentality, a preoccupation with the lust of the eyes which is superficial, a preoccupation with that which is superficial skin deep morality. Whether it's pornography or possessions, it's the same lust that's behind it, the lust of the eyes. Can I address a very sensitive subject, because I believe Internet pornography is one of the greatest scourges of the church of Jesus Christ today, yet it's the silent sin - and the likelihood is that there are a number of folk here tonight and you're committing that sin. Possessions are fuelled by the lust of the eyes, what you see you want to have, and all of it could be summed up as covetousness - that's why people are head over heels in debt. Why is it? Do you ever wonder? Will Rogers said: 'Simply because we spend money that we do not have, to buy things that we do not need, to impress people that we do not like' - the lust of the eyes.

Then there's the pride of life, thirdly. Literally it means 'the boasting of what a person has or does'. An unholy ambition of self display, self glory, pride. What you have in these three things are unholy appetites, unholy avarice, and unholy ambitions. They are all illustrated in Eve in the Garden of Eden, and Satan said: 'Hath God said ye shall not eat?', and she saw that the tree was good for food - the lust of the flesh, it could feed her; and it was pleasant to the eyes, the lust of the eyes, she saw its beauty and attractiveness; and she saw that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, the lust of pride. You see in Matthew 4 the temptation of the Lord Himself. Satan came and said: 'Turn those stones to bread', praise God He didn't have a lust in Him, but He was tempted in all points as we are. On that very point Satan did tempt Him - the lust of the flesh - to feed Himself at Satan's demand; to cast Himself off the pinnacle of the temple to make a show, for the lust of the eyes; Satan offered Him the kingdoms of the world, the pride of life!
John says the first reason why you ought to hate the world is that it's incompatible with your love for the Father. You can't love the Father and love the world, you can't love the Father and lust the flesh, lust with the eyes, and have pride in your life. As Billy Sunday said, it makes as much sense to talk about a worldly Christian as it does to talk about a heavenly devil. They're mutually incompatible. Someone has defined worldliness as 'anything that keeps me from loving God as I ought to love Him, and from doing the will of God as I ought to do it'. Now, you put your little question into that definition, and realise that the world is not benign, the world is not innocent - no matter what trendy evangelicals are saying today! It is a treacherous place for the child of God!

The second reason, whilst the first is incompatibility with love to the Father, the second reason why we should hate the world in verse 17 is the fact that it is transient. Verse 17 says: 'The world passeth away, and the lust thereof'. When a company or a business falls into financial straits, sensible people don't invest in it. When a builder sees that the ground is like a peat bog, if he's wise he doesn't lay a foundation on it. But to live for the transient things of the world is absolute foolishness, it's like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic - the boat is going down, so what is the point? You wouldn't go out and buy a car if you knew it was going to break down in a couple of weeks, so why then do we invest our lives in things that do not and will not last? This world passeth away. Why won't you give your heart - and I'm challenging you tonight - to something that will last? Beauty does not last, it has an expiry date. It maybe lasts a couple of decades, it maybe lasts shorter than that when you wake up beside her in the morning - I don't know! Fame is fickle, even political power passes - you see Tony Blair, the darling of New Labour when he was elected, and now they could hang him! It all passes, and the bottom line of it all is simply this: whatever way you want to define the world and worldliness, none of it satisfies! None of it!

A shop notice on one occasion put up the words in its window: 'If you need it, we have it'. Their competitor across the road put up a sign the day after: 'If we don't have it, you don't need it' - but folks, that's the bottom line where the Lord Jesus Christ is concerned. If it's in the world and He doesn't offer you it, you don't need it! All you need is Him! There's such a great deal of confusion about worldliness, and there is such a great deal of worldliness in Christianity - to such an extent that I am deeply troubled at times. Maybe it's because the church, when it's set alongside the world looks like a pale black-and-white photograph, when the world is a multimedia presentation. We look old, we look dated, and the more worldly the world becomes the more outdated we feel - but the bottom line is: whatever the world's perception of us is, and whatever modernity's perception of us may be, the world cannot give us what Jesus can give us! For what Jesus gives never passes away, it lasts! The amazing thing that has thrilled my heart today about the end of verse 17 is that God's word says that: 'he that doeth the will of God' lasts also! He will abide forever!

Let me throw out that challenge to you today: fathers, elders, young men, little children - why don't you work for something that is permanent for a change? Why don't you work for something that will last! This was the verse that D. L. Moody took as his motto verse right throughout his life and ministry. When he died it was inscribed upon his tombstone: 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever'. Do you know something? Moody was called 'Mad Moody' by the world, but now he has no regrets, whereas Henry VIII took Hampton Court away from Cardinal Woolsey, who actually built Hampton Court, and poor old Cardinal Woolsey before he died said something like this: 'If I had only served my God like I served my King, I wouldn't be here today'. But 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever':

'The stars shine over the land,
The stars shine over the sea,
The stars look up to God above,
The stars look down on me.

The stars will live for a million years,
For a million years and a day,
But God and I shall live and live
When the stars have passed away'.

Hallelujah, he that doeth the will of God, and loves not the world, neither the things of the world shall abide forever.

Father, help us not to love the world. Lord, we confess that there are things that we do love, and Lord there's times that we put those things before the Saviour. Lord, maybe our whole life at this moment is for the lust of the flesh, or the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life - those could even be legitimate things like careers, and businesses, and family. Yet they could be taking Your place. Lord, help us all to say tonight: 'Take the world, but give me Jesus, all its joys are but in name, but His love abideth ever through eternal years the same'. Lord, help us to give You all, that we may be those who do the will of God, that we may abide forever as overcomers in time and throughout all eternity. Lord, we're all weak, but help us to be strong as we wait upon the Lord. Amen.
1 John - Chapter 7

"The Christian And False Doctrine"

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We're turning to 1 John again and chapter 2, 1 John chapter 2, and we're beginning to read from verse 18. Our title tonight is 'The Christian And False Doctrine', and we'll read through to verse 27.

Verse 18 then: "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things. I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also. Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life. These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you. But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him".

Now you'll remember that in our outline that we gave in our introduction last week, we saw that from verse 15 through to verse 27 where we ended our reading tonight, John speaks to us of two dangers to the fellowship between God's people and one another, and specifically God's people, the church, and the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ with whom our fellowship is. Last Monday evening we looked at the first danger to such fellowship, and that was the threat of the world - 'Love not the world, neither the things that are of the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him'. We alluded to the fact that the second danger that John tells us of is false teachers, and we didn't have time to look at it because John goes into great detail in these verses that we read together tonight, verse 18 to 27, regarding this danger.

So we're looking tonight at the Christian and false doctrine. We do well to remember that this epistle is not only an epistle about fellowship, but it is also an epistle about assurance - how we can know that we have eternal life, how can we know that we're a true Christian, and those who are true Christians, and those who are belonging to the true Christian church and that which may be false in taking the name of Christ to itself. This portion also presents us again with another test. We looked in the last couple of weeks at the social test and the moral test, the moral test being: if we obey His commandments, we know that the life of God is in us; and if we love our brother, that is the social test, we know that the Father dwells within us. But this evening we're looking again at the doctrinal test: how we can know those who are in true Christian fellowship by the doctrine that they teach. I want you to remember right back to the very first week in our introduction, if you were here you'll remember I put on the screen a slide of a spiralling upward staircase, because that is the thematic cycle of this little
book of 1 John. We will be revisiting themes week after week, as John revisits them throughout this book. Each time he repeats a cycle, like an upward spiral staircase, he adds a little bit more information to it. So we're going to learn as we continually revisit these truths.

We recently considered, as I said, the moral test, obedience; the social test, love; and now we're going to look again at this doctrinal test. We do well to remind ourselves, as John was reminding his Christians in his particular day, that the battle today in our world is not just between love and hatred, that is a social battle; it is not just a battle between holiness and sin, a moral battle; but it is a battle for doctrine, it is a battle between truth and error. So what more has John to tell us regarding this doctrinal test that we're going to look at this evening? Well, here's the first thing in verse 18: John tells us, addressing these Ephesian Christians and the wider people who would receive this circular letter, 'Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time'.

He tells us first of all, how young believers in particular are threatened in this age. Now we have already dealt with the fact that many of us, whether we're young or old, are threatened by the world, and particularly, I suppose, the young. Now he is really homing in on the young, and he's saying this is how young believers in particular are threatened: by false doctrine. This time the subject of doctrine is introduced by John with a warning about false teachers. Now, we saw last week that he's already spoken to the fathers in the faith, and he talked to the young men within the church, and then he addressed the little children. Now I again he is speaking to these little children, the Greek word is 'pedea' (sp?), it means 'immature', 'little children'. I want you to imagine it like a family talk that this father in the faith, John the apostle, is giving to his spiritual children. It's as if he's gathering them all beside the fire, he's giving them a kind of pep talk regarding the dangers that there are out there in that big wide world to the Christian. He's talked about the world, but now he's saying that there are also dangers here in your home, in the very church of Jesus Christ.

Now I wonder if you were giving the pep talk to the new believers in Ephesus, what would you warn them about? Well, John says in verse 18: 'It is the last time'. It could be translated, 'It is the last hour'. There's a great debate regarding what this period of time may be, and I'm not entering into it tonight, save to say that I believe that the last hour, the last time that is spoken of here is the time between the first coming and the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ - more specifically, the time between Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came, and the second coming of our Lord Jesus. It is the church age, it is the age in which we can say, 'It is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation. Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your heart'. It is the time of God's grace. I wonder do you know that tonight? That not every age in history that has been or will be in the future is a time when you can avail of God's grace in salvation: now is the time, you've been given today, and we don't know when the Lord will come and when this period will end, but we know this - while it is today, we can be saved.

Are you saved? Don't waste any time about! Who knows? Even this very evening the Lord Jesus could return. But yet, this is the import of what he is saying: it is the last hour. Not only is the church age a time when there's opportunities in the gospel, but the church age is a time when we need to be alert, and more so as the coming of the Lord Jesus draws near - because of these false teachers, these antichrists that are around. The import of what John is saying is also that young people in the faith, not young people by age but by their birth in Christ in the faith, are susceptible particularly to the lies of these antichrists. Of course, John's readers had
been taught that an Antichrist would arise prior to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ again to the earth. This Antichrist would pretend to be Christ.

If you turn back with me for a moment to Matthew chapter 24, we read the words of our Lord Jesus Christ predicting the coming of this pseudo-Christ. In verse 4 chapter 24 of Matthew: 'Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many', and then if you look down to verse 24 chapter 24, 'For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect'. Then the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 gives us a further insight into this Antichrist: 'Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition'. That is the Antichrist that both Old and New Testament prophesies, and we find him right throughout the whole of the book of the Revelation. John the apostle particularly uses this term 'antichrist' four times, and once in his second epistle of John - but what John is saying is that prior to the rise of the Antichrist, look at verse 18, there shall arise many antichrists, if you want to put it 'many little antichrists' - antichrist with a small 'a'. They will precede this great Antichrist that will come on the earth.

So right throughout the period of the church age, there will be people who will arise claiming to take Christ's place, or be against Christ. Let me define this word 'antichrist' for you, because it is often misunderstood. This prefix 'anti' is a Greek prefix that can have two meanings. It can mean 'against', and you're familiar with that meaning, someone who is 'anti' is against. But it can also have a meaning that people are not so familiar with, it can mean 'instead of'. I believe that that is the chief meaning here and in many passages regarding antichrist in the Bible, because what John is teaching us and what the Lord taught in Matthew 24 is that these antichrists will offer themselves and their doctrines as a substitute for the true Christ. They'll not so much appear to be against Christ, although they will be, but they will be offering themselves and their doctrines as a substitute for the true Christ.

Here's a lesson if there ever was one for young Christians, indeed for all of us, and it's simply this: the devil wants us to take a substitute for the Lord Jesus as long as we don't take the real thing! He'll settle for us taking a pseudo-Christ, or something that is like Christ in person or in doctrine, as long as we miss the real Christ! That's his ploy. If you think for one moment that he wants everybody to be Satanists and bow down to him - no! He doesn't care what you bow down to, even if it's called 'Jesus Christ', as long as it's not the real thing! John's interest, by the way, is not so much in the antichrist - and that's why we're not going to dwell on it for too long, for our interest often is on him - but rather John's interest is that his children in the faith resist the influence of antichrist that is around even today and, the inference is, will increase more and more as the second coming of our Lord Jesus approaches.

So the question begs: how do these young believers that are threatened by antichrist recognise Antichrist and these little antichrists? Well, there are two ways I believe John outlines for us that we can recognise these antichrists. The first is: they are apostates. They are apostates. Verse 19 outlines this: 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us'. Now an apostate, to define it for you simply, is one who has completely abandoned the Christian faith, one who is standing apart from the Christian faith. It seemed that once they professed it, and stood beside the doctrines and tenets of Christianity, but now they're denying it and standing aloof from it. Now verse 19 tells us that these false teachers professed Christ, and at one time they were
even the associates of the apostles - and I believe that's what the word 'us' means here collectively. John is speaking as one of the apostles: these people were with the apostles and knew the apostles. These people bore the name of Christ, these people identified with their local church, these people were baptised by immersion, these people were baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. These people sat at the Lord's Table and broke bread and drank from the cup - but John says, after a while within the fellowship of the assembly, they eventually showed their true colours and they left the church, showing that they were not children of God, they were not of us in the first instance.

They withdrew themselves from the body of Christian believers, and either they formed their own little sect with their new revelations or their new teachings, or they went straight back into the world. But the point is this: they were among believers, but they went out from them, and the fact that they didn't continue with them was a sign that they were never of them in the first place. Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying here this evening: this does not mean that everyone who ever leaves a church is an apostate or is an antichrist, just in case you get that into your head. But let me say this: it should make us think, because some people flit from church to church as if it matters nothing, and although it doesn't make you an apostate and it doesn't make you an antichrist, we ought not to take fellowship so lightly.

But what is the context of this withdrawing from the church fellowship? Well these who were splitting the church and schisming the church, they were doing it by false teaching. They were saying that they had a new revelation, that God had told them something that had never been known and that the rest of the Christians didn't know, and they withdrew with that elitist knowledge and made another group and claimed to be the true church. Now, whilst there is a lot of flitting about from denomination to denomination, that's not what John's talking about here, but there's a lot of this does go on: people who break away and claim that they have a new truth. Judas was one of the twelve, the Lord said He had chosen one who was a demon, and the matter wasn't in him in the beginning, and one of the signs of that was the fact that he never persevered in the truth. What John is saying here in verse 19 is that one of the signs that you're a child of God is that you persevere in the truth, you don't withdraw and stand apart from the Gospel, the faith once delivered to the saints, and deny it with various heresies. You don't split the church with untruth in the fundamental doctrines of the faith. So if you want to be assured of your salvation, make sure that you're persevering in the truth of God's word, and make sure that you're not attempting to split God's church with any false fundamental doctrine.

John says they went out that they might be made manifest that none of them were of us. Of course, we spent a year almost in the study of cults and false religions and so on, and it was interesting for me as I studied it and then did more research recently in putting the book together, how many of these modern heresies and cults were initiated by those who once professed the Christian evangelical faith. Let me give you an example: Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the Moonies, was born into a Presbyterian family. Joseph Smith was reared in a Presbyterian home, the founder of Mormonism. William Miller of the Seventh Day Adventists was a licensed Baptist preacher. Ellen White, their famous prophetess, was reared in a Methodist home. Charles Taze Russell of the Jehovah's Witnesses was brought up as a Congregationalist and as a Presbyterian. Mary Baker Eddy was a Congregationalist in a very strict home, I'm led to believe. William Irvine of the Cooneyites was a Faith Mission Pilgrim, took crusades all over Ireland. They went out from us, but they were not of us! They were apostate, and God's word is teaching, I believe, that the matter wasn't in them in the beginning or they would have persevered with the truth.
Of course, a mark of a cult is that they believe that their breakaway group with their new revelation on truth is the only true church. All of them, without exception, condemn the rest of Christendom as apostates, when they're the apostates! They are apostates, that's a sign of how you know antichrist and those who are antichrist: they stand away from truth, they split the church with their new revelations on fundamental Biblical doctrine. There's the first sign, but how can young believers see this threat in a second way? Well, John tells us they deny the Christ. Not only do they show themselves as apostates, but in verse 22 - and I know I'm splitting up the line of thought of the passage, but we want to get the themes here tonight, as we've seen in recent weeks the themes are scattered way throughout, and there's not much order to this particular epistle. In verse 22 he says this: 'Who is a liar' - now in the original Greek that reads like this 'Who is the liar' - the liar. You see these false prophets were saying that John was the liar, and there was a great debate as to who was telling the truth and who was of the devil. John is saying: 'Well, who is the liar in this great debate?'. John is careful to point out in this verse 22 that anyone who denies the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ denies the Father also, and that is a sign of those who are of the devil. 'Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son'.

Now please stay with me here, because what I am not saying is that these people, these apostates, these false teachers do not have any Jesus in their creed. Oh, far from it, most of them do have - but this is the point: just because a man or a movement takes the name of Jesus Christ does not mean that it's the Christ of God, the Christ of the Bible, and the Christ of the Gospel. Oh, banish the thought! So many people say to me: 'But they worship Jesus, they're Christocentric!' - what does that mean? Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11 that there are those who worship another Jesus - another Jesus? Yes, another Jesus, a fictitious character of their own imagination, an individual who bears no resemblance or relation to the true Christ of God found within the word of God. That's what was happening in this church at Ephesus, remember the Docetists who were the forerunners to the Gnostics? What were they claiming? That the man Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that He had no preexistence; and when He was baptised there in the Jordan the Spirit of God came down upon Him, the Christ-Spirit, and enlightened Him and made Him presently at that moment the Christ and anointed on one of God; but that same Spirit left Him before He died at Calvary - so He was born a man and died a man! That's not the Christ of the Bible, John is saying.

People around today, they have their own Christ. He may be a Christ who is not quite God, and therefore probably a Christ that doesn't quite save. He may be a Christ that offers you health and offers you wealth, rather than salvation from sin. He might be a Christ that is continually offered in the mass, yet He never ever seems to take away our sins no matter how many times He is sacrificed. Now listen, be plain here tonight, for John certainly was! The Son of Thunder says it well, be under no illusion: 'He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son'. The application of what he says is that that person who is wrong on this point is not to be trusted on anything. Do you get what John is saying? Who is the liar?

Now relativism is a philosophy that's in our world today, but it's had a massive effect even on evangelical religion, because people are saying today that it doesn't really matter what you believe - all that matters is how you believe it, the sincerity wherewith you hold your convictions. Some people in our world of all colours of the spectrum of religious belief, believe that all they need to do is worship God sincerely. Even Christians are saying this, Dr William E. Hawking who was once the Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University in the States, he wrote a book 'Living Religions in a World of Faith'. He said this several years ago, I quote: 'God is in His world, but Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, are in their little private closets, and we shall thank them but never return to them' - did you hear that? 'God is in His world, but
Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, are in their little private closets, and we shall thank them but never return to them'.

Now listen: Professor Hawking and all his like need to realise, as John said, you can't have God if you won't have Christ. That's it put plainly. If you won't have the Christ of the Bible, you cannot have God - as verse 23 says: 'Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father'. Indeed, the Lord Jesus Himself said something similar in John chapter 8 and verse 19: 'Then said they unto him, Where is thy Father? Jesus answered, Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also'. If you want to know God, you have to know Christ, for God can only be known through Christ. Then in verse 42 of John 8 He says: 'If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me'. If you want to love God with all your soul, with all your heart, with all your mind and all your strength, you've got to love Christ that way or you can't have Him!

Now what we have here is the wonderful truth of the unity between the Father and the Son, and we are on holy ground when we speak of these things. John's teaching that you cannot have the Father unless you have the Son, and without a right view of the Son of God you cannot have a right view of the Father - it's impossible! Take it or leave it, friends, it's God's word! David Jackman in his commentary, I believe he's a Church of England minister, put it like this, I quote: 'The God of the Bible is a Trinity. There is only one true God and He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without the Son we cannot know the Father, and those who deny this may use the word 'God', but they cannot know Him'. Now that's what John said.

John Calvin, the great reformer's insights on this particular verse are very helpful - listen to what he says, and bear with me as I read through it, he says: 'I readily agree with the ancients, who thought that Cerinthus and Carpocrates were those referred to here', as the false teachers, the heretics teaching this Docetistic doctrine, but he goes on, 'The denial of Christ extends much further; for it is not enough in words to confess that Jesus is the Christ, but he must be acknowledged to be such as the Father offers Him to us in the gospel. These two heretics I mentioned gave the title of Christ to the Son of God, but imagined that He was a mere man. Others followed them, like Arius, who adorned Him with the name of God, but despoiled Him of his eternal divinity. Marcion dreamed that He was a mere phantom, a ghost. Sabellius imagined that He differed in nothing from the Father, that Jesus was the Father and the Spirit. All these', Calvin says, 'denied the Son of God; for none of them really acknowledged the whole Christ; but adulterated the truth about Him so far as they were able, and made for themselves an idol instead of Christ'. Calvin then goes on to add: 'We now see that Christ is denied whenever the things that belong to Him are taken from Him'. He goes on to say: 'To confess that Jesus is the Christ is to confess the Christ of the Scriptures'.

Now John makes it very plain, whoever you are. The Unitarians will say: 'We want God, but we don't want the Christ of the Bible' - well, you can't have Him. The Christian Scientists, and the Muslims, and the Jehovah's Witnesses will say: 'Give us Jehovah, give us Yahweh, give us the Creator of the ends of the earth, but not your Christ' - you can't have Him! The Jew, the Freemason, the liberal Protestants all are saying the same: 'We'll worship God and bow down with the pagans in the jungle, but we don't want the Christ of the Bible!'. Jesus says: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me'.

How young believers are threatened: they are threatened by these false teachers. How are they recognised? They are apostates, they stand apart from the truth, they have subtracted themselves from the body of people who believe the truth; and secondly they deny the Christ.
But my second point is: how should such a threat be thwarted? This great threat of false teaching towards young believers, how do we thwart it? Maybe you're sitting here and you're a young believer in the faith, and you're thinking to yourself: 'How would I ever recognise what was false teaching and what was true?'. Maybe you're not so young in the faith, and you're thinking the same thing! Maybe you see somebody like me, or maybe not me, but another teacher who is able to uncover some of these great truths and counterfeits - and you're thinking to yourself: 'That's a special gift that they have, I could never see through all that'.

Well, how can a young believer know what the truth is and what is falsehood? Well, John tells us every single believer, young, middle-aged or old, should be able to tell. Verse 20, look at it, John says: 'But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things'. How can such a threat of false teaching be thwarted in the life of the young believer? First of all: the Spirit of God - the Spirit of God. You see, John is saying that the Holy Spirit has been given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ according to the promise of John chapter 15 verse 26, where He said: 'When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me' - He shall lead you into all truth. Jesus promised the Spirit, Jesus sent the Spirit, the Father sent the Spirit also - and John is saying: 'You have the Spirit, believers, young believers, you have an unction, an anointing from the Holy One to tell what is truth and what is error'. Now this anointing, this unction is not an influence of the Spirit, it is the Spirit Himself. We're not anointed by the Spirit, like something being sprinkled on us or something zapping us, we're anointed with the Spirit, we're given Him - He is the anointing, He is the gift of God.

Let me explain this to you. When a person is saved, at that moment of conversion they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit indwelling them. He is the one who enables every believer, whoever they are, to discern between truth and error. Now Galatians teaches this, Paul says in Galatians chapter 4 and verse 6: 'Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father'. If you're a son of God, you have the Spirit of God - simple as that. Now, taking the illustration from natural humanity, a newborn babe into a family is as much part of the family as the eldest brother or the eldest sister, isn't that right? They might be younger, they might be only born, but they're in the family. What John is saying here is, by inference: how dare anyone say that just because you're a babe in Christ, that you're not one of the elite, you're not one of the charismatic people in this sect that has broken away who has an extra knowledge of God, a new revelation, a great experience that has taken them to a higher level. How dare you, because if you're one of God's children you have an unction from the Holy One, and you know all things! Don't believe these boys running about Ephesus, telling you that they're in the know, and they know something that you don't know about God - don't you believe them! You know all things because you've got the Spirit.

Perhaps that statement 'You know all things' should be translated, 'All of you have knowledge' - that, some believe, is the sense. Now it doesn't mean that these people knew everything, it wasn't a perfect knowledge that he's talking about here, but what he's saying is: you've got the capacity to know what is true and what is not. Any question that comes along your path, any false doctrine that comes along your way, a false practice or behaviour, you have the potential of being able to discern what's right and wrong because you've got the Spirit who knows everything, for He's God! Isn't that tremendously encouraging tonight? The youngest and the simplest believer in Christ has the capacity for all the knowledge that they need to get through this Christian life. Take that natural illustration of a little newborn babe: when a baby is born he's endowed with all his faculties. He mightn't have a lot of hair, he mightn't have any teeth - mind you, some of you are bravely on and you've neither of those two! - but
nevertheless, the fact of the matter is: as they grow, and as they develop, what happens? The whole person develops - but the point is this: it's in them, it's programmed, and what is in them just comes out. Now, I grant you, we are responsible for bringing some of it out and allowing the Spirit to work in us. There are sometimes barriers and hindrances, and the Holy Spirit can be grieved, and the Holy Spirit can be quenched - and I'm sure that most of us couldn't say that we're filled with the Spirit, but we need to get away from thinking about getting more of the Spirit to thinking more about the Spirit getting more of me! Do you see the difference? You have the Holy Spirit, and don't let anybody tell you that you haven't - if you're saved He is in you!

The point that John is making, with all these heretics running around, is: there is no enlightened elite in the church of Jesus Christ on whom others depend. This is what modern charismatics need to realise: if we start talking this way, that there are different planes of revelation in God's church - I know there's different calibres of Christians, that's a different thing - but if we're starting to say that there's a little group who are the elite, and we need to depend on them for their knowledge, we're going back to Rome - the Reformation might as well not have happened, for that's what the Popes of Rome said, that's what the Priests and Cardinals said! 'You can't interpret the word of God', so they chained it up, they were the only ones who could read it in the Latin and expound it. Whether it's a Pope or a Cardinal or a Priest, or a modern-day prophet, or a shepherd, or a healer, or a charismatic guru - the truth of God tells you, no matter who you are, as long as you're converted by God's grace: 'Ye have an anointing of the Holy One!'.

I hope this is clearing up a few questions for some people here tonight. In verses 26 and 27 he tells them that the Holy Spirit abides in you: 'I [have] written unto you concerning them that seduce you', or would lead you astray - there's plenty trying to do that. 'But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him'. The Holy Spirit, he says, abides in you - now what does that mean? It means that once you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, He'll never ever be taken away from you - hallelujah! How could anyone believe that you can be saved one day and lost the next? The implication of this regarding these false teachers is that if you have received the Holy Spirit, you don't need anyone to teach you. Now, John is not saying that you don't need teachers to teach the word of God, otherwise I'd be redundant - but so would he be, because he's writing a letter, an epistle, and he's teaching them himself. God in Ephesians 4, and in other parts of the scripture, makes provision for teachers within the church. What he is meaning is that the Christian doesn't need any teaching apart from what is found in God's word, and the author of God's word is the Spirit of God, and He is the one who dwells in us and has promised to lead us into all truth. Yet these Gnostics profess to have additional truth - John is saying there's no need of it, because you've got all you need in the Spirit.

So, the first way of thwarting this threat of false teaching for young believers is the Spirit and, as we have already alluded to just now, the second is the word. In verse 21 he says: 'I have not written unto you because ye know not the truth, but because ye know it, and that no lie is of the truth'. John wasn't bringing a new revelation to them in 1 John - no, he's reminding them of something they already knew. He wants to reassure them that no lie is of the truth. Now, what does that mean, no lie is of the truth? Is that not obvious? He's telling them: 'These Gnostic teachers, and any false teachers who you're listening to, if what they tell you is contrary to what's in God's word: they are liars!'. You can't get much plainer than that. Now, how could they know the difference of what the truth was? Did we not spend a lot of time on
it in chapter 1 and verses 1 to 4? How can they know the truth? Yes, they've the Spirit indwelling them, but John says 'that which was from the beginning', and he repeats this to them in verse 24, 'Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning'. What was from the beginning? The One who the apostles saw, they heard with their ears, their hands had handled, and then he tells them: 'For what was manifest to us we delivered unto you', the apostle's doctrine which is the Word of God!

Oh, it's so plain, yet so many err regarding it. In 2 Timothy, didn't Paul say to that young man in chapter 1 and verse 13: 'Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus'. This is the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, and we're not to change it or doctor it, or bring it up to date - we're to hold fast to it! In verse 24 the safeguard for young believers is to let that truth abide in us which we have known from the beginning, the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and of all His apostles. John is ever pointing them back to the simple gospel message of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Our safety, John is saying, is to stay as close to the word of God as possible. The word he uses: 'Let it remain in you', he uses this Greek verb 'remain' four times in 1 John, and the word literally means 'let it take up a permanent address in your being', 'let it have a settled home in your soul'.

The Spirit will never be taken from us, that's not what he's implying - that He'll get away somehow, but he's saying you are responsible for how He abides in you, how His teachings live out in your being, how you are filled with His influence. There's a great debate, of course, regarding how you're filled with the Holy Spirit. There are those who teach that you're saved, and you don't get the Holy Spirit when you're saved, and then maybe six months down the line you speak in tongues and then you get Him, or you're baptised in the Spirit or slain in the Spirit, and then you get the Holy Spirit and you're filled in the Spirit. I believe in the Spirit's filling, and I don't believe every Christian is filled in the Spirit the moment they're saved. I believe every Christian is gifted by the Holy Spirit, and all you need in the Holy Spirit is potentially given to you at your conversion - but if there was a definition of what is the filling of the Spirit, it is simply this: 'Letting the Holy Spirit have His sway in your life according to His word, that there be no hindrances, no obstacles'.

Let me define it in scripture, Colossians 3:16: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' - that is a definition of the Spirit's fullness, if ever there was one. Does the Spirit have His sway through the word? Is the word of God abiding in you? Does the word of God have a permanent address in your life? Has the Spirit of God a settled home in your heart? Well, are we not hearing afresh from God that we ought to test everything by this book - it is the canon, Latin meaning 'the measuring stick' for everything. We ought to ask of everything: 'What saith the Scriptures?' - and if a teaching doesn't agree with this book, we throw it out, we should reject it! What are we to think when the Mormons come along and present us with their little Book of Mormon, and its subtitle is 'Another Testament of Jesus Christ'? We're to say: 'That's a lie!' - that's what John says! After the New Testament and the first revelation of Jesus Christ, there's no such a thing as a new revelation of Him. There's no such a thing - listen to this - as new truth, it doesn't exist!

Indeed, Harry Ironside used to say: 'If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new'. You might think that's a very blanket statement, but that's what John is saying in effect. Back in the 19th century Charles Hodge boasted of Princeton Seminary, which incidentally has apostatised since then, he said: 'I'm not afraid to say that a new idea never originated in this seminary'. Most universities wouldn't be proud of such a statement, but what he was trying to get across was that they studied the Scriptures, and it has been revealed. Then in verse 25
John says: 'This is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life'. When we abide in Christian doctrine we have the proof of the reality of our faith when we persevere in the truth. We don't stand apart from it, we don't deny who Christ is and what He did and everything that He is in the presentation of the gospel of God in the New Testament. If we accept this all by faith, we have the promise of eternal life! This is why it's serious, folks: for what you believe not only affects the way you behave, but it will affect whether you end up in hell or heaven! That is why false doctrine in the fundamentals of the faith is so serious, because Jesus said: 'My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me'. They hear His word as He spoke it, and they follow Him in His ways.

Someone has said, and I think it sums up all that I've said and all that John said very well: 'With the word of God in your hand, and Spirit of God in your heart, you've everything you need to understand truth and to grow in God'. Is that not what Paul said to Timothy, when he said in that second epistle in chapter 3 verse 14: 'But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works'. But when people abandon the word of God, do you know what happens? They don't believe in nothing, they believe in everything.

John's message is to us tonight: we are living in the last days, and the last days increasingly are fraught with terrible dangers. But if a man is drilled in the word of God, and filled with the Spirit of God, and thrilled with the Son of God, the victory of God will be his.

Our Father, we thank You for the gift of Thy Spirit and for the gift of Thy Word. Lord, oh how we squander these gifts but, Lord, we pray that both of them together may have their harmonious way in our lives. Dear God, that You'll protect us in these awful degenerate days from false teaching, especially for the lambs among us - protect them, and lead us all by Your Spirit in the word, that we may be full men and women, mature in the faith and filled to the uttermost with all the capacity of the Holy Ghost that God has given us. Oh Lord, hear us we pray, and may Thy word always be a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our pathway. May all of us be able to say tonight that the word of God dwells richly in our hearts. For Jesus' sake we pray, Amen.
So we're turning to 1 John chapter 2, and we have two verses to finish off in chapter 2, and then we'll embark on chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. So our portion for consideration tonight is chapter 2 verse 28 through to chapter 3 verse 3, and our title this evening is 'The Family Likeness'.

Beginning to read at chapter 2 verse 28: "And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming. If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him. Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure".

It is a fact of life that you cannot choose your relatives, and of course it is equally a fact that you can't choose your parents. Now, we owe a great deal to our parents, not least the character traits that we have, many of us, in our personalities. Now some of those may be regretful to us. Maybe your nose is a little bit too long, or your temper is a little bit too short, or your frame is a little bit too light - but the fact of the matter is: you can't avoid it, and many of those things may be character traits that have been passed down in the genetic makeup of your parents to you as their children. Likeness, family likeness is the proof of the relationship that you have with your parents and with your family. What we have come to accept naturally in the physical realm as a matter of descent, John here is applying in our spiritual relationship to our Heavenly Father. He's wanting to point out that if we are truly the children of God, and we want the assurance of being children of God in fellowship with God as our Father and His Son Jesus Christ there must be, and indeed there will be, a family likeness. We as sons and daughters, children of God, will have a resemblance to our Heavenly Father.

Of course in verses 28 and 29 he outlines this: 'Little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming'. You see, like begets like, and God's children have a paternal characteristic, family traits to their Father - and the particular one that John is outlining for us, which I think is the fourth that we have dealt with up to now, is that the righteousness of God Himself will be displayed in our lives. This is the chief family likeness that the children of God will display: as God is righteous, as God is holy, we ought to be so as well. To abide in His fellowship, as verses 28 and 29 say, we ought to display His likeness, we ought to manifest His righteousness. Now, it's alright me pontificating from the pulpit here, but I know, and I freely admit with you who are struggling in the Christian life, that this is easier said than done. Our Heavenly Father is perfect, and the Lord Jesus spoke to us in the Sermon on the Mount and said: 'Be ye perfect, even as your heavenly Father is also perfect'. That is a tremendous injunction that is given to the child of God: to be like God in the very aspect and character trait that we find it most difficult to be like Him in. Yet God's word is saying this is the very characteristic that is showing likeness between Father and son and daughter in the family of God.
Now we all admit equally, I'm sure, that it's not easy being a Christian in the world today. We struggle, don't we, from time to time. Everything is against us, the world is against us and all the temptations around us, and our own flesh, our old nature that we'll deal with in the weeks that lie ahead in the will of the Lord, it is also against us. The devil himself and all his minions are round about trying to distract us from the highway of holiness. We might be sitting here thinking: 'Well, it's alright for you to tell me that I'm to be like my heavenly Father, and that's a proof that I'm a son or daughter of God, but how do I get there? What is the motivation? I just seem not to be able to work it up, and my heart is filled with apathy, I'm lethargic regarding Christian things and I feel pulled down by all of these things around me in the world and in my flesh, and the influences of the devil. What is the motivation for me to have this type of fellowship with God, to abide in Christ, and to live a holy life as He is holy?'.

Well, we're looking this evening - and this is so important - at what is the motivation for living a holy life and manifesting this characteristic of our Heavenly Father that is righteousness. It's found first of all in verse 28, that we not be ashamed when He appears, that we will have confidence and not have shame at His coming. Now, incidentally, 'Now little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear', that word 'when' could also be translated 'if He appear'. Now that is not the 'if' of doubt, but it is the 'if' of imminence - what do I mean? Well, John is saying to them: 'Perchance, if in your lifetime Christ should come, you've got to live a life of righteousness like your Heavenly Father so that you'll not be ashamed, but that you'll have confidence when He comes, because He could come in your lifetime'. It's this thought of imminence, 'imminence' literally means that the Lord Jesus' second coming is hanging over us all the time - that's a fact, but I wonder is it a practical reality in our lives? That we're living our Christian daily experience, and seeking to live holy before God, because we know that His coming is hanging over us every moment of our day.

Now I know that many talk about the coming of Christ, that many get excited about it and know an awful lot about it, but many of those same people will be embarrassed when the Lord Jesus appears, because they will not have confidence toward Him, they will be ashamed before Him at His coming. We ask, rightly so, why would that be? Simply the answer is: because of their lives. Revelation 22 tells us in verse 12: 'Behold', Jesus says, 'I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be' - every man according as his work shall be. Second Corinthians 5:10: 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad'.

Now there is the question tonight, I throw it out right at the very beginning: do you have confidence toward the Lord concerning the imminent return, that He could come back at any time, and you would have confidence toward Him, you would not be ashamed? Maybe you can't say that, I wonder if any of us can say that, but maybe you've got as far as saying: 'Well, I never want to be like that when He comes. I want to have confidence toward Him, I don't want to be ashamed. How can I avoid this fate?'. Well, it's very simple: live righteously before the Lord, as if He's going to come at any time. Now, that's easier said than done, as I've already said - but what John does for us tonight, and what I want to relay to you from the word of God, are the motivations for living righteously in the light of the second coming of our Lord Jesus.

There are three of them, I believe, in a sense. The first we find in verse 1, John says if you're going to live righteously to such an extent that when Christ comes you will have confidence and you'll not be ashamed, first of all you need to contemplate your great privileges.
Contemplate your great privileges. Verse 1: 'Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God'. Now, what are these great privileges that we ought to contemplate that will motivate us to live a holy life in the light of the coming of our Lord Jesus? Well the first, John tells us: 'Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us' - we're motivated to live holy lives through the love of the Father. You could put it: it is the privilege of His passion, His love for us. Now remember that John the apostle is the great man that wrote John 3:16 that we love so well: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life'. He's telling us that the greatest motivation for living for Jesus until He comes is the love of God.

Now we're talking about family life here, aren't we? Love is the greatest drive in the human family. A man falls in love with a woman, and a woman falls in love with a man, they make tremendous sacrifices the one to the other, they become one flesh, they relinquish their individuality to an extent - and human love has a tremendous drive to it, there's a great passion, a great power. But the fact of the matter is: we are not children of God because we love God, we are children of God because He loves us. Now taking the family relationship again as an illustration, we were all loved by our parents before we even knew what love was. Most children don't understand what true love is, but that doesn't stop their parents loving them. We were in that position.

I read a story today about a man who was deeply depressed as a Christian because he felt that he didn't have the love that he should towards the Lord in his heart. He talked to a close friend, and the friend said this to him: 'When I go home from here I'll take my little baby on my knee, I'll look into her sweet eyes and I'll love her with all my heart. Now she loves me very little, if at all, and if my heart were breaking it would not disturb her. If my body were aching with pain, it would not interrupt her play. If I were dead she probably would forget me in a few days. Besides this she never has given me any money, but she has been a constant expense to me, and I'm not rich - but there is not money enough in the world to buy my little baby!' 'Why is that?', he said, 'Is it because she loves me, or because I love her? Do I dare withhold my love from her until I know that she loves me? Or is there something that she must do first before she can earn my love? Absolutely not!'. Then he looked into his friend's eyes and said: 'If you want to love God and let your love for God grow, don't focus on how much you love Him, focus on how much He loves you'.

This is God's family and what John wants you to grasp just now, if you're ever going to be motivated to live, in the light of Christ's coming, a holy life, is the great love of God which far exceeds anything on the human dimension. It is beyond our imagination, the privilege of the passion of God's love toward us that we enjoy. Verse 1 says: 'Behold, what manner of love', now that literally could be translated like this, 'Behold, of what country is this love' - that's literally what it says. 'Behold of what country', now what does that mean? It's expressing the unearthly characteristic of this love. I could contemporise it by saying this: 'Behold, this love is out of this world!'. That's what John is saying: God has lavished, literally that's what 'bestowed' means, He has lavished this love upon us. Get a glimpse of it, John says, if you want to live a holy life in this awful world and you don't want to be ashamed when Christ comes, you need to get a greater capacity of an appreciation of His love for you.

Isn't that what Paul said in Ephesians? 'That we would be able to comprehend with all the saints the breadth, the length, the depth, and the height of this great love'. The children sing:

'It's so high, we can't get over it,
So low, we can’t get under it,
So wide, we can’t get round it,
It’s wonderful love!'

God loves us so much, John says, that He calls us His children. But not only does God call us His children, but John is saying He claims us as His own. Now I don’t know about you, but I’m proud - in a right sense - to have God as my Father. I’ve nothing to be proud about in myself, but I’m proud of that fact - but do you want to know what blows my mind tonight? That God is proud to have me as His son. He’s not ashamed to call me 'son', or you 'daughter', and He'll never ever disown me no matter how faithless and unbelieving I am, He remains faithful for He cannot deny Himself. Once in Christ, in Christ forever! That's love, if ever there was love. Contemplate that great privilege: the privilege of His passion through the love of the Father.

Here's the second aspect: through the love of the Father we have been made sons of God. This is now not the privilege of His passion, but the privilege of our position: 'Now are we called the sons of God'. Now right away this blows out of the water this idea that everyone is a son or a child of God, and this is what we hear so often today - the universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man. It doesn’t exist in God's word, you have to become, be made a son of God. So the question begs: how are you made a son of God? Well, the first step is the new birth. John tells us about it in his first chapter of his gospel, verses 12 and 13: 'But as many as received Christ, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'. Now what does that mean? Well, we're not born-again by human decision, we're not born-again by something that we inherit from our parents or our culture or our religion, we're not born-again because of the desire of another or the desire of ourselves. It doesn't come primarily by human determination, the salvation, this new birth is not of man, it is of God. It's not about what man does for God, it's about what God does for man! That's how we can know that we have eternal life, that's why we can know that we are the sons of God, because it doesn't depend on you or me, it depends on God. Do you know tonight?

Verse 1 in many translations, and because some manuscripts put 'and we are' after 'the sons of God', '...we should be called the sons of God, and we are' - adding for emphasis that we know now. This isn't something that we're waiting on when the balances are weighed in heaven and God says: 'Well, your good has outweighed your bad, so you're a son of God' - not a bit of it! We can know now, the assurance is given to us now. 'How is it given?', you say - well, if you've got the traits of your Heavenly Father. Do you have those? Oh, we've seen them: there is the moral test, you obey His commandments; there is the social test, you love your brother; there is the doctrinal test, you believe in the Christ of God outlined in the Scriptures, and you believe about Him as God has revealed Him concerning who He is and what He has done. Why do you need to know? Because Christ is coming, and if you don't know for sure the likelihood is you'll be ashamed and confounded without confidence toward God.

But John now is turning his attention away from the new birth, simply because the new birth alone does not make you a child of God. Did you hear me? I see you perking up now! The new birth alone, oh, it's the first step of course, and it gives us a new nature which allows us to fellowship with God and enter into heaven - but God could have, if He so desired, allowed us to enter into heaven as slaves. He could have saved our souls and took us to glory, but the Bible's teaching here is that we are not slaves, but God has made us sons. Now would I be right in saying that most of us would be glad to get to heaven even as a slave? I heard of a preacher who said this: 'If God had said to me, 'James, you may go to heaven, but only if you
agree to sweep the streets of glory', I would have said: 'Where's the broom, Lord?'. If He had said, 'You may go to heaven, but only if you agree to polish the pearly gates', I would have said: 'Where's the wax?'. If He said, 'You can go to heaven, but only if you agree to wash the wings of the angels', I would have said: 'Where's the soap?'. But praise the Lord, I’m not going as a slave, I’m going as a son'. Hallelujah!

My friend, get a glimpse of this: we don't only have a new nature in Christ, we have a new name. It's not just new birth that deals with us spiritually, we have adoption that deals with us legally. This is now what John is talking about, we have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. In Roman law, a bit like our own law, adoption was a legal act of taking a child that was not your own. That child had no rights in your family, it had no lineage or heritage, but by that legal act of adoption you were taking it as yours and giving him or her the privileges and the rights of your family. That's not an easy thing to do - what would motivate such an act? Well, I can only imagine, but perhaps some would choose a child because of its attractiveness or its beauty, blue eyes or blond hair - more superior, of course, is brown eyes! - its own beauty or attractiveness. Maybe it was obligation that made people choose a child, maybe they were left in a will to a brother or sister. But what we have here is God adopting us into His family out of pure, naked, raw, unconditional love - for no reason other than the fact that He loves us!

Friends, do you see it? We have been made sons through the love of the Father, the privilege of His passion. We now have the privilege of our position, 'Now are we the sons and daughters of God'. A wee boy was cruelly teased at school because he was adopted, and after a wee while his stiff upper lip began to wobble, and he could take no more. He blurted out: 'You can say what you like, all I know is my parents chose me, yours couldn't help having you'. That's what it's all about, isn't it? We are chosen in Christ. Galatians 4:4 and 5 says: 'When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons'. God's word says we've received the spirit of adoption, by whom we cry 'Abba, Father'. I don't wish to be irreverent, far from it, or over familiar with the Almighty, but that little word 'Abba' means 'Daddy', or 'Papa' - take it or leave it, that's what it means. Whilst we must always have reverence before God, this is the intimate relationship: the Bible says His Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.

I think it must have been the doctrine of adoption that motivated Samuel Crossman to write:

'My song is love unknown,
My Saviour's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take, frail flesh and die?'.

Contemplate our great privileges, the privilege of His passion, the privilege of our position. Through the love of the Father we have been made sons, and then we find in verse 1, so that we will share in his suffering: 'Therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not'. What John is saying is: the world didn't understand Christ, and the world's not going to understand you. 'If they hated me', Jesus said, 'they will hate you'. That liberates me, because so many Christians today are running around trying to get the world to understand them, aren't they? They're trying to become acceptable to the world - now I know that in our evangelism we have to be all things to all men that we might win some, but the fact of the
matter is: they’re never going to understand us - never! Because the natural man does not perceive or understand the things of the spirit, they are foolishness to them. Here’s one of the greatest foolishnesses of all: that we should count it a privilege to suffer and not be understood for Christ!

Sure isn't that what the apostles said when they were whipped and scourged for preaching in the name they were forbidden to preach in - they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. I'll tell you this: if you're suffering for Jesus, you'll not be ashamed when He comes again. First Peter 4 says: 'Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy'.

Contemplate our great privileges: one, through the love of the Father, the privilege of His passion, we have been made; two, sons of God, the privilege of our position, so that we can share in his suffering, the privilege of worldly persecution. Have you contemplated our great privileges - boy, if anything would motivate you, it's motivating me as I speak tonight, to live godly that I'll not be ashamed when Jesus comes! But the second thing he tells them to do to motivate them to live godly in the light of the coming of the Lord is to anticipate their glorious prospect, anticipate our glorious prospect. Verse 2: 'Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is'. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones said that he felt sorry for anyone who had not spent a week with such a verse as this one.

It's a wonderful verse, isn't it? Someone has said the Christian story can be told in three chapters: the first is entitled, 'I'm not what I used to be'; the second, 'I'm not what I should be'; but the third, 'I'm not what I'm going to be'. These Docetists were coming around saying, 'You can be sinless now' - we can't be sinless now, sure we can't? John has told us, if we say that we have no sin, or we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar and we deceive ourselves. But the fact of the matter is this: though we are discouraged, and I don't know if I'm talking to a child of God this evening who's discouraged because you find it difficult to measure up to the mark of other people, you see others as being super spiritual and yourself as some kind of Christian pygmy just not reaching their standards. Maybe there's others in your circle or in your denomination that make you feel even smaller, because you haven't had the so-called experience that they have had. Maybe you throw up the head, and you think: 'What's the point of it all? It can't be done, you can't live godly in Christ Jesus in this world'. This is what John is saying to this little discouraged flock: 'Look up, be encouraged, it will be done when Jesus comes'. You are the sons of God now, and the motivation for living righteously now is that it doesn't yet appear what you shall be, but when He shall appear, you'll be like Him. In other words, live righteously now, John says, because now is the dress rehearsal for eternity. You're going to be perfect - oh, my friend, that you could get that tonight and anticipate your glorious prospect in the future in Christ. I'll tell you, there'll be nothing else that could be a catalyst like that to cause you to live godly for Christ Jesus today.

Now there's a number of aspects in this glorious prospect that he wants us to anticipate. First of all there's an uncertain expectation, an uncertain expectation: 'It does not yet appear what we shall be'. It's hard to imagine, isn't it? Being perfect! Maybe some of you're sitting there thinking: 'It's not that hard!' - that's the wives, probably! The fact of the matter is: you know what a failure you really are, and I know the failure that I am. It's uncertain in its expectancy in the sense that we really don't have a clue what it's going to be like. It is incredible!
I don't know whether you've heard the story of Michelangelo, when a servant brought him a great lump of marble and the servant said nonplussed: 'What do you see in that?', and he said, 'I see the statue of David'. He says: 'You see what?', 'The statue of David, because I'm not seeing what you see, I'm seeing what it shall be'. That's what John's trying to get across: God is not finished with us yet, it does not yet appear what we shall be. I love that little chorus: 'He's still working on me, to make me what I ought to be'. First Corinthians 2 says that: 'it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him'. Let me tell you, some of you are experts on the Lord's return, I'm telling you tonight that the half you think you know, you don't know - and what you do know, some of it is wrong! And that's from somebody who knows nothing! But I know this much: that there is an uncertainty to our expectation in this regard, that we don't know, we don't contemplate or are able to grasp what we will be. That gives me more delight than rhyming off to you a whole list of things that we will be.

There is an uncertain expectation, but secondly there is a definite revelation: 'but we know that, when he shall appear' - a definite revelation. We mightn't know everything about how He will appear, and how we will appear with Him, but the fact of the matter is: it's definite that He will be revealed. Literally the word 'appear' means 'revealed'. Three hundred and eighteen times in the 260 chapters of the New Testament we find the second coming of the Lord Jesus. The Lord spoke of it: 'If I go away, I will come again', John 14. All the apostles in their epistles spoke of it, and Paul spoke of that moment of rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4: 'If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words'. The fact is this: a definite revelation of Jesus Christ is coming! It's a fact, whatever the unbelieving world says about it matters little: Jesus is coming again!

An uncertain expectation, a definite revelation, and then thirdly an incredible transformation: we shall be like Him. Second Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 10 is a remarkable verse, I don't know whether you've ever contemplated it, Paul says: 'When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe'. Christ, one day, is going to be glorified in you! He's going to be admired in you, because when He comes you will be like Him! Now that doesn't mean that there'll be a trillion Jesus Christ's in heaven - I think that's the conception that some people have. He's not going to dissolve our personalities, we'll retain our personalities apart from sin, and our individualities within reason. We'll still be ourselves, the Lord Jesus isn't going to destroy David Legge or you - but what John is getting across, and the whole Bible, is that we will behold Christ's face in righteousness. We will be satisfied when we awake with His likeness, the thrust of the thought is: we will be morally like the Lord Jesus. Do you get it?

With the Spirit's help, we're all down here trying to live godly in Christ, and it's possible but it's not easy - but there's a day coming when we'll be like Him! We'll be free from all possibility of defilement, of sin, of trampling into temptation, of sickness, of sorrow, of death. That's why Paul said in Philippians: 'For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself'. An incredible transformation: we shall be like Him! Are you
anticipating this glorious prospect? If anything should motivate you to live for Christ, is it not these things? That He's coming, it's definite; and when He comes, you will be like Him - trying to live godly in Christ Jesus down here is not a waste of time, because you're going to get there, child of God, it's going to happen! Your faith will give way to sight, and you'll be perfect!

Then fourthly, anticipate our glorious prospect, there's also a desired realisation: we shall see Him as He is. You've desired it, haven't you? It has never been realised, we look through a glass darkly, but then face-to-face we'll see and know. Can I tell you this tonight: men have never seen Jesus, the Lord in Christ, the way He is. Did you hear me? They have never seen Him the way He is. You might say: 'Did the disciples not see Him?', they saw Him the way He was, but not the way He is. How is He now? Well, they saw Him without His glory, they saw Him without all the majesty, without all the splendour of heaven - but Jesus, in John chapter 17 and verse 24, praying to His Father, said: 'I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world'. There's a day coming when we'll be caught up to be with the Lord, and we'll be changed into His likeness, and we'll see Him as He is, as no men on earth have ever seen Him before. Oh my friend, this thrills my heart:

'Jesus, these eyes have never seen
That radiant form of Thine;
The veil of sense hangs dark between
Thy blessed face and mine'.

But what a day that will be when this will be accomplished - how will it be accomplished? This is mighty: at that very moment we look on His face, we'll be changed, perfect, and will see His glory - and His glory will be reflected out of our lives. The very look into the face of Christ will bring it to pass!

'Oh, to see Thee as Thou art,
And love Thee with unsinning heart'.

Well, we're motivated to live Christlike, contemplating our privileges and also anticipating our glorious prospect, and thirdly - do you know what will happen? These things will generate a growing purity in our lives. Verse 3: 'Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure'. It could be translated: 'Every man that has this hope set on Him'. The Authorised in the typesetting is a little bit misleading in the sense that this is what the verse means, verse 3 - watch my finger: 'Every man that hath this hope in Him', Christ, 'purifieth himself', me, 'even as He', Christ, 'is pure'. In other words, if you believe that Jesus is coming again, that will cause you to live a pure life down here, because you'll be living in the light of his coming. It will purify you, even as He is already pure.

This is the balance of the Christian life, it's the balance of prophecy between expectation and participation. It's the tension between living for today and looking for tomorrow, and it's often a tension that is missed - for many who are looking for tomorrow are not living for today, and some Christians who are living for today are not anticipating tomorrow. But isn't it wonderful to even contemplate tonight that we have a tomorrow? Do you know what rejoiced my heart today? John is an aged man, the last of the living apostles, and here he is, and the old man is still thrilled with the love of God. The old man is still anticipating the second coming of Christ and its imminence, waiting for it every moment of the day. Some old men in our world today, and old women, all they can do is look back because they've nothing to look forward to. I
know there's some more mature folk in our meeting tonight, and maybe you've lost all that you know as dear to you, and everything is gone that held you down here - well, listen: you thank God tonight that you've got something to look forward to. You've got glory, and your loved ones in Christ; and you've got the Lamb of God to see and know and be changed into His likeness. Would that not purify you?

Jesus urges us, because He's coming again, to keep watching, Matthew 24:42; to be ready, Matthew 24:44; to keep serving, Matthew 24:46. He left specific instructions of what to do as we await His coming: we are to witness to Him everywhere across the world, we're to build His church in every generation, we're to occupy till He comes - that means we're to be doing and using resources and putting this money to the work, using our talents for Him, not burying them. We're to remain faithful to the word of God and keep doctrine pure. If we're living in the light of His coming, it will keep us in this balance of our present responsibilities and our future expectations. So I'm asking you: as you contemplate your great privileges, the love of God, your position as a son of God; as you consider the glorious prospect that you're going to see Him, you're going to be like Him, you're going to be changed to be in His character - does it not generate a growing purity in your life? It ought to, there's something wrong if it doesn't.

D. L. Moody said: 'I have felt like working three times as hard since I came to understand that my Lord is coming again'. That's what it ought to do! If your head is full of dispensational truth, and your life's not full of holiness - that's useless! This is a truth not to be held in our heads but our hearts, and if it's held in our hearts it will affect our hands, and it will affect our feet, and it will affect our lips! One thing is sure: if we are anticipating this glorious prospect, we'll not be ashamed when He comes. When He comes, do you want to be found with a grudge in your heart towards another brother or sister? When He comes, do you want Him to find His money in your pocket? When He comes, do you want Him to smell booze off your breath? Do you want Him to find dirty magazines under your bed? Do you want Him to find disharmony in your marriage or in your home? Will He find you in a place that He wouldn't mind being in Himself? Will He find you doing something that He wouldn't mind rolling His own sleeves up and helping you with? Will you have confidence toward Him or will you be ashamed? Will I be ashamed?

A group of teenagers were enjoying a party and someone suggested they go to a certain bar for a good time. A little girl called Jan said: 'I'd rather you took me home, my parents don't approve of that place'. 'What's the matter?', one friend said, 'Are you afraid your father will hurt you?'. 'No', replied Jan, 'I'm afraid that I might hurt him'. That girl understood the principle of being a child of God. He loves us, do we love Him? One writer has said: 'A mind singularly focused on meeting Jesus will discover a renewed power to pursue righteousness, so that when He appears our righteousness will resonate with Him'. This recalls the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:8: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'.

I'm going to finish by reading to you the words of the late Vernon McGee, the Bible teacher on radio and Bible expositor. I'm just reading them, because I couldn't put it the way he does, and the sentiment of what he is communicating is tremendous. I want you to listen carefully and grasp it as we close tonight. He says, and maybe you can identify with him: 'We all have regrets. Personally', he says, 'I don't know about you, I can speak only for myself, but I very frankly make this confession: I have never really been the man that I've wanted to be. I am at the age now where I guess a man begins to dream a little, and as I look back over my life I realise that I've never been the man that I've wanted to be, and I've never been the preacher that I've wanted to be, I've never really preached the sermon that I've wanted to preach.'
People have been kind to me and have said nice things, and I appreciate that, but I know in my own heart that I wish I could do better. I've never been the husband that I've wanted to be. Previously I mentioned an illness I had several years ago which necessitated a three-month rest, and my wife and I sat out on our patio and did a great deal of reminiscing. As I revealed and reviewed my life, I thought 'My, I wish I'd been a better husband than I was. I should have been'. I've never been the father that I wanted to be. Some people think that I'm a little too much for my grandsons, well I'm trying to make up for them what I left out on my own child. I've never really attained my goal. I thank God for the way He has led me, He has been good to me in my life and I rejoice in the fact that He has given to me a Bible teaching radio ministry. I never thought He'd do that, but He has - but I have not attained my goal. But He says: 'Behold, I make all things new'. He is saying, 'Vernon McGee', and He is saying this to you too, 'We are going to be able to start all over again. You are really going to live an eternal life, and you're going to attain your goal'.

Does that not motivate you to live for Him? When you contemplate your privileges, and you anticipate your glorious prospect, does it not generate a growing purity - to be pure, even as He is?

We say 'Maranatha', even so, come Lord Jesus, Amen.

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Transcribed by: Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - December 2005
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Verse 1 of 1 John 3: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God".

Now the first thing we want to do this evening is to look at verse 6, verse 8 and verse 9 - for this particular passage of Scripture has been a bit of a quandary to many theologians and Bible teachers for this one reason: it seems to categorically say, in a casual reading of the text, that the Christian should not sin. Of course, human beings in general and Christians in particular are aware, acutely, of their own inherent sinfulness both in their nature and in their practice. They know that they are sinners, and they know that they do sin. So we have to determine first of all this evening, before we can go on any further and make sense of what the apostle is saying to us in the crucial verses of this chapter, what he means when he says that Christians should not sin. What does he mean by sin? He says in verse 6: 'Whosoever abideth in him', in Christ, 'sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen God or Christ, and has not known Him'. Verse 8: 'He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil'. Verse 9: 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin'.

The Son of Thunder seems again to be black and white in his condemnation of sin of any kind in the life of the Christian. The thought should come to your mind, especially if you've been with us from chapter 1, that there seems to be an apparent contradiction in what John is saying here in chapter 3 and what he has already said in verses 8 and 10 of chapter 1, if you
One thing we have to determine first of all, of course, is that the word of God does not contradict itself. If there's a complication like this, there's always an answer - indeed the Lord Jesus Christ said that the scripture cannot be broken in John 10:35, so there has to be an answer. Whilst we don't look just for any answer, we know that there is a true answer. Now some people erroneously find the answer in what has been known as the 'doctrine of perfectionism'. That is, they believe that you can, as a Christian, get to a stage of existence where you no longer sin, and the root of sin has been extracted from your spirit. Now John Wesley was a great man of God, and I would always hesitate to say anything detrimental about a man who did so much for the Lord Jesus Christ and won so many souls for Him. Yet throughout John Wesley's life he was convinced of what he called, I quote: 'The absolute impossibility of being a half-Christian'. I happen to agree with him, and I hope that you do too - we ought to be out and out for Christ when we take His name to ourselves. But whilst we agree with that, John Wesley in his life, unreasonably I believe, came to the conclusion and took an unbiblical leap to conclude that because a Christian is to strive for perfection, because the Lord Jesus has said, and God in the Old Testament has commanded 'Be ye perfect, as I, the Lord your God, am perfect', he erroneously concluded that we are capable of being so; that we can, in this lifetime, reach that standard of absolute and complete perfection before God.

We would all agree that that is the standard that we are to strive at, we are to try and be like the Lord Jesus by the help of His Spirit. But who of us, for one moment, in this congregation or anywhere, I would imagine, would ever claim to be perfect? We can never claim to have arrived or achieved, even the apostle Paul could say: 'Not as though I have already attained'. Indeed, I believe, to say that you're without natural sin or practical sin is to transgress what we have read in chapter 1 and verses 8 and 10 - we are calling God a liar, the truth does not reside in our hearts. But here we find the distinct lack of clarity that is in this Wesleyan doctrine, this doctrine of perfectionism: John Wesley didn't claim it for himself - that's very interesting. Yet he declared, and I quote him again: 'I do not contend for the term 'sinless', though I do not object against it'. This is the confusion that perfectionism brings. On the one hand he says: 'I don't claim it for myself, and I wouldn't contend for this word 'sinless', attributing it to a human being, though I do not object against it'. He didn't think he had it, he probably didn't want to rule out the possibility that a human being, by the grace of God, could obtain perfection in this realm.

Charles Finney, the revivalist of the late 19th century, also taught perfectionism. Again he did many exploits for the Lord, whilst his doctrine at times was rather dodgy, he also taught, I quote: 'It is self-evident that the entire obedience to God's law is possible on the ground of natural ability' - with our own flesh we could naturally obey God's laws. But Finney also backed off, like Wesley, from pressing this doctrine too far by explaining that, I quote him again: 'To overcome sin is the rule of everyone who is born of God, and sin is only the exception. The regenerative habitually live without sin, and fall into sin only at intervals so few and far between that in strong language it may be said of a truth that they 'do not sin'.
So on the one hand he's saying that it is possible to perfectly and completely in our natural man obey the commands of God, yet on the other he is cautious to press this too far, and actually defines what is to say that a Christian does not sin in this way, that 'it's just not habitual sin, it's sin as the exception rather than the rule, few and far between'.

Here's where I believe that the language of this doctrine of sinless perfectionism has been a curse on the church and on Christianity as a whole, because on the one hand it propounds the distinct possibility of being perfect, yet when its proponents are pressed they admit that it has eluded them, and to not sin in the biblical sense ultimately means to only sin at intervals, to sin as exceptions rather than rules. So even they define this 'not sinning' in 1 John and in the Bible as not sinning in a lifestyle of sinful existence. So this is actually what John means, and when we look at this word 'commits sin' that we find in verse 8: 'He that committeth sin is of the devil', we find that this Greek word for 'commit' literally means 'does sin' - 'Him that does sin', and it is in the present continuous tense. That means it is someone who is doing sin now, and continues to sin. It is speaking of a continual behaviour. It actually means a sinful lifestyle, so whenever you find this in 1 John, where it talks about committing sin, it is speaking of a sinful existence, a habitual practice of sin. One translation puts it: 'No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning, no one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him'.

Now what John is doing for us in this new portion of Scripture is, he is arguing that this is another proof that one is not a child of God. This is a great epistle concerning assurance, didn't we find that out week after week? It concerns also how we can know we have assurance and are in fellowship with God and His Son Jesus Christ. Here he gives us another rule of thumb whereby we can know whether we're a child of God. If we are not habitually living in a lifestyle of sin, a sinful existence, we can know that we are the children of God. One commentator put it well like this, Alfred Plummer is his name, I quote him: 'Although the believer sometimes sins, yet not sin but opposition to sin is the ruling principle of his life. For whenever he sins he confesses it, he wins forgiveness and perseveres with his self-purification; but the habitual sinner does none of these things, sin is his ruling principle and this could not be the case if he had ever really known Christ'. Plummer is correct: the Christian will sin, but the Christian's existence should be in opposition to sin. Sin should not be the ruling principle of his life, and when he sins, as chapter 1 outlines, he should confess his sins and know forgiveness, win it and persevere with self-purification. But if you're not a child of God you will be, by a habitual lifestyle, a sinner - sin will be the ruling principle of your life, and if it is: you can be sure that you have never really known Jesus Christ in His saving or sanctifying way.

Now we did ask the question why John is writing in this fashion, and again we are brought to the backdrop of the theological arguments that were going on in this little church in Ephesus and further afield. These false teachers were coming in, and they were teaching a dualist doctrine - if you don't know what that is, it's simply 'dualism' which taught that the flesh, the material world, is essentially evil, and the spiritual world is righteous and good. So from that they concluded that, because the material is evil, and this body ultimately is going to be burnt up in the end (that's what they taught), it doesn't matter what you do in the flesh because the flesh will perish and it will only be the spirit that lives on. As long as you're all right in your spirit, you can do whatever you like in the flesh. Another name for this was 'antinomianism', 'anti-law', and it was a reaction against the Judaisers. The Judaisers were coming into the church and teaching that you have to keep the law of Moses, you have to keep the ceremonial and the ritual law, you have to keep rules and regulations - and so a group of people swung in a pendulum over to the other extreme and said: 'No, we're not
going to keep any rules, we’re not going to keep the rules of the word of God or even the New Testament rules and principles of Christ. All that matters is the spiritual realm, we can indulge the flesh'.

You can see right away what was going on. There were some running around taking the name of Christ and living a debauched, depraved existence in the flesh. We find the fruit of the flesh and the lusts and works of the flesh in Galatians chapter 5, and all of these things were being manifest in the personalities of those people who were taking the name of the Lord Jesus. So what John does is he builds a biblical case to reason with the believers that are left in this little church, that what is done in the flesh matters greatly - in fact it is a matter of spiritual life and spiritual death. Let us be absolutely clear tonight: our works, the things that we do which are bad or good in the flesh do not determine and cannot decide whether or not we will be saved. I would have to say, just as a little rider to that, that there are a lot of people who use these verses, they say, as proof to argue the doctrine that once you're saved you can again lose your salvation by sinning in some particular way. That's not what John is teaching, that our works, our good or bad, will determine positively or negatively whether or not we will be saved, but rather he is telling us that as Christians our works display and demonstrate whether or not we have been saved. That's so important to make that distinction, but understand it: our works cannot save us, but our works are to be the determining factor to show whether or not we have been saved.

What John does for us in these verses, as we're going to see now, is that first of all he gives us a negative that tells us why living a sinful lifestyle is proof that we do not know God. Then secondly, by inference, positively, he gives us the secret to victory over sin, how we can know overcoming the sinfulness in our flesh and in the world round about us.

So the flow of his argument is: to live a sinful life is, first of all, verse 4, to live lawlessness. To live a sinful life is lawlessness. Look at verse 4: 'Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law'. Now the Authorised Version, when it says 'sin is the transgression of the law' would be better translated, as some translate it 'sin is lawlessness' - that is the sense, sin is lawlessness. John says that to live a sinful lifestyle is lawlessness. Of course, he's taking us back to Exodus chapter 20 when God's law, the ten commandments were given, and God was showing to man the standard that He required of him. But don't fall into making the mistake that many do in our world today, even religious people, thinking that God gave the ten commandments as some kind of ladder of rules up which we climb to heaven by our own ethics and moral standards. Rather, Paul makes clear for us in Galatians, that the law of God was a schoolteacher to bring us to Christ. God's law was to instruct us, but only Christ could save us; and so the law instructs us that we need a Saviour, and points us to Christ. Now, if the law could save us in and of itself, keeping the Do's and Don'ts of the Old Testament, why would it need to point us to Christ? It has to point us to Christ, because Christ is the only answer - but the law was given to show us our inherent sinfulness, to show us that we couldn't keep it, to show us how far short we fall from the glory of God, and to make us feel our need for a Saviour. It's like a magnifying glass that shows us more clearly and largely our own sin.

Now, what happens when we're converted - or what's meant to happen? We come to Christ, and we repent of our sin, and the Bible says that God gives us a new nature to live righteously. What we could not do under law, when it says 'do not steal, do not kill, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not covet', so on and so forth - those things that we could not do in the flesh, as Romans says, now by the law of the Spirit in Christ Jesus we have been made free, and we are now able to live out the fruit of the Spirit and effectively
fulfil God's law by His power. So that we can say 'we do not commit adultery now, we do not steal, we do not kill, we do not covet', and it's not us in our own flesh doing it, is the very life of God in us to live a righteous life. Now what John is saying is this: that is the mark of the child of God, that they are actually living out the law of God. In verse 3 of our chapter 3 he says that every child of God purifies himself, even as Christ is pure. The true child of God, as he anticipates the second coming of our Lord Jesus, will be purifying himself as he gazes on the prospect of Christ.

So John's asking us, in effect, the question: what are we to think of a person that professes faith in the Lord Jesus, but lives a life of lawlessness? What's our conclusion to be? Lawlessness is rebellion against one who should be obeyed, and if we are rebelling against God in our actions and in our existence, we're wanting our own way, what are we to conclude about our state before God? Are we a child of God or are we not? Clearly, John is saying, we cannot be children of God if we live lifestyles of lawlessness. Sin is not just an outward act, it is also an inward attitude. You could have everything right in a legalistic fashion on the external and in religious ritual and rule, but in your heart it could be a rebelliousness that is shaking its fist, a wilful shaking of your fist in the face of Almighty God.

I heard the story today about a little boy whose mother put him in the closet for being bad - I wouldn't advise you doing that. But she didn't hear him for a while and wondered what was going on, she opened the door and said: 'What are you doing?'. He said: 'Well, I've spat on your coat, and I've spat on your dresses, and I've spat on your shoes, and now I'm waiting for more spit'. Rebelliousness! He wasn't sorry! It's like the little girl who was in the car, and Mummy shouted again and again for her to sit down and put her seatbelt on. Eventually she did it, and then a few miles down the road she says: 'Mummy, I might be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside'. That's what sinners are like, that's what we once were but it's not what we should be now. We need to ask questions of our own state regarding salvation if we have a rebelliousness in our heart, constantly, that wants to live lawlessly in the face of God.

The sign of a Christian, John is saying first of all, is that they will have a surrendered will to God's will. What is God's will? Well, we've already learnt this in chapter 2 verses 3 and 4: 'Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him'. We are to be obedient in love to the Lord Jesus, His principles and His precepts, as He in His completeness has fulfilled the law of God. What did He say? 'If ye love me, keep my commandments'. So I'm asking you tonight: do you have a desire, is the ruling principle of your life trying to get at breakneck speed to lawlessness before God? Or is there a desire, even though you fail and fall at times, like all of us do, is your desire to be obedient? Or is your desire to continually rebel? My friend, if it is to rebel, John says it's doubtful if you're one of God's children.

Then secondly, to live a sinful lifestyle is, John says in verse 5, a denial of Christ. 'Ye know', verse 5, 'that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin'. Basically what John is saying is: how can you call yourself Christ's-one, a Christian, and then continue in a lifestyle of habitual sin? John is saying that it's a complete denial of the purpose of the incarnation, why God's Son took upon Himself human flesh. Incidentally, the Dualists denied that, they believed that Christ was some kind of phantom or ghost, because the material, the flesh, is evil - so how could God's Son take evil? They denied the incarnation, they denied that Christ actually died and physically rose again, but John is now coming to the true believers and saying: 'How can you call yourself a Christian, and then live in the denial of why Christ came in the flesh, why He died, why He rose again?'. Indeed, to continue in sin would be a
denial of the name that we bear, for in Him, Christ, is no sin. How could we call ourselves Christ's ones, in whom is no sin, and take upon ourselves the complete existence of a sinful habitual lifestyle.

There are three New Testament passages that deal with the sinlessness of our Lord Jesus. Peter, that great man of action, said: 'Christ did no sin'. Paul, that man of great thought in the mysteries of God's word, says: 'Christ knew no sin'. John, who was the disciple whom Jesus loved, the one who had an intimate fellowship and communion with the Lord, says: 'In Him was no sin'. He was without spot and blemish, as the Levitical offering in the Old Testament being offered to God. He had to be, to bear the sins of the universe. But John's point is this: how could anyone take His name, and claim to bear His likeness, and then relish a life of sinfulness? It is impossible! It is a denial of Christ's character!

Then not only is it a denial of Christ's character, but he tells us it is a denial of Christ's cross. This is why Christ came into the world, John is saying in verse 5, to take away our sins. Doesn't the Scripture say that He was the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world? The first time John the Baptist lays eyes on Him in the ministry of Christ, what does he say? John 1:29: 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away' - takes away - 'the sin of the world'. Now that phrase 'takes away' is interesting, it literally means 'to lift up and to haul off'. 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who will lift up the sin of the world and haul it off!'. Now, I think it's on a Friday we get our bins collected, and you know what happens when the bin lorry comes round your way - I shouldn't call it 'bin lorry' or 'bin men', the 'waste disposal technicians' I think is the correct terminology. They gather the rubbish up, and then they throw it into the lorry, and they haul it off for you and you never need to see it again. It's wonderful, throw all your rubbish in your own domestic bin, put it out in the wheelie bin, and before you know it, a week later it's all gone. That is the sense here, Christ is lifting up our sin, He's hauling it off. When the Lord Jesus died on the cross and shed His precious blood, He took away all the rubbish, all the trash and the garbage of our lives, and He has hauled it off forever. Here's the wonderful thing: when God hauls it off, we don't need to look at it again! 'There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus', but better than that: when God hauls it off, the devil can't haul it back.

The Psalmist has said: 'As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us'. How far is that? It is an immeasurable distance, East from West, it keeps going, one away from the other. Not only do you never see your sin again, and the devil can't haul it up in your face again, but perhaps greater than those two things: even if you go looking for it, you'll never find the dump where God has put it. It's gone forever, for Christ took it, died, buried it, and three days later rose again without it - it's gone! The chorus says:

'Rolled away, rolled away,
And the burden of my heart rolled away'

Now here is John's point: there is something wrong if a so-called Christian is a bin-hoker, if they're looking for their sin again. My friend, is that you? I know people can backslide, I know the prodigal son, Luke chapter 15, and I know where he found himself after he spent all his inheritance in riotous living. He finds himself among the pigs, eating the swill - but remember this please: he couldn't be satisfied eating it, and he came to himself, and he got up and he went to his father. There's something wrong if you can live a lifestyle which is a complete denial not only of the character but of the cross of Christ, and it doesn't figure on you at all! The prodigal didn't stay with the pigs!
Now the positive in this point of John's for us is that if we are defeated, if we are constantly falling into sin - well, first of all, we need to question whether we're truly saved - but whatever the condition is that we find ourselves in, there is an answer. It's inherent in this verse 5, the answer is found in the victory of the cross of Jesus. This is why Christ has been manifested: to take away our sins, for in Him was no sin. The message is this: there is deliverance! My friend, whatever your particular sin is, even if it is an habitual lifestyle of sin and you're not even converted tonight, the wonderful message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is that you can be. The power of God's Son at the cross is the dynamite of God that is able to deliver all men.

But whilst there is deliverance, we have to be warned that a sinful lifestyle can never ever be an alternative lifestyle to the child of God. We hear an awful lot about alternative lifestyles today, don't we? Some are even saying that you can be a practising homosexual or a celibate homosexual, and be a Christian. Some are propounding that you can be committing adultery and be a Christian, you can practise idolatry and be a Christian, you can engage in constant drunkenness and be a Christian. Let me tell you what God's word says in another portion, 1 Corinthians chapter 6, listen to it carefully, verse 9: 'Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God'. God's word is clear: you can do those things, but if you're going to become a Christian you've to repent of them. Now I'm not saying that you'll not fall into some of those sins, God forbid that you should, but all of us fall into sin at some time in our Christian life, if not an awful lot - but this is the point: these lifestyles of sin must change and cease to be your lifestyles, cease to be the ruling, dominating factor of your existence. Here he points it out in verse 11: 'And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God'. Some of them were going back to their old sins, but Paul was saying: 'If you're truly converted, your life will not be a denial of Christ, of His character and of His cross'.

Well, my friend, the question is posed to you: have you been delivered from these things? I know you might have had a hiccup or two, but if you, from the moment of your profession, have constantly lived exactly the way you lived before, you cannot be saved. That's what John says. Then thirdly, he tells us: to live a sinful lifestyle, verse 6, betrays an absence of abiding. Verse 6: 'Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him'. You've never seen Him or known Him, in other words you've never been born again if you have a sinful lifestyle existence - for those who are born again, they abide in Christ. What does 'abiding in Christ' mean? Well, the Lord Jesus said: 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you' - it's talking about God's word having a resting place in you, and you having a resting place in Christ. Essentially, what it is in a practical level is communion with the Lord Jesus, fellowshipping with Him, getting to know Him, becoming one with His Spirit. Now here's the great question, and it's a frightening one for every child of God - at least it ought to be - if you never ever abide in Jesus, what does that mean? If you never fellowship with Him?

I remind you of Matthew 7:23, where a lot of people will come and say to the Lord on that day: 'Did I not do this, that and the other in Your name?', and the Lord Jesus will say, 'Depart from me, I never knew you'. John says, 'Neither have they known him'. Do you know Him? Have you got to know Him more since you professed faith in Christ? You know, this is why we push for people to read the Bible, and to pray, and to have a daily time with the Lord, to
cultivate it and to get it to grow, because this is one of the ways we get assurance of our salvation, and we know fellowship with God and we grow as a Christian. But for someone to profess faith in Christ and never ever abide, or even have a lifestyle of abiding in fellowship with God, it is questionable whether they even know Him! Serious stuff, isn't it?

But the positive here for us in verse 6 is that there is victory over sin in communion with the Lord Jesus. This is the source, if we abide, have fellowship with Him, if we're in perfect harmony with Him and there's nothing between our soul and His heart we can have victory over sin! Now sonship that we looked at in our last study in the first three verses brings us into union with Christ, but it is fellowship that brings us into communion with the Lord. Do you see what it's saying? A Christian who is in sweet fellowship and wonderful communion with his Lord will constantly be gaining victory over sin. Maybe you don't think it's important, and sometimes, I have to confess with you, it's the hardest thing in the world to get on your knees and pray and to read the Scriptures - but never underestimate the power of it. I look back on times when I have fallen into sin with shame, and I can as often as not pinpoint the time when perhaps my times with the Lord started to wane - and then all of a sudden we wonder why we fall flat on our face in that old sin. If we live a sinful lifestyle it betrays an absence of abiding.

Number four in verses 7 and 8: to live a sinful lifestyle is not only lawlessness, and a denial of Christ, and a betrayal of an absence of abiding, but verses 7 and 8 tell us that it proves our spiritual parentage. Verse 7 says: 'Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as God is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning'. Now here we have John telling us that you can only be righteous if you have the nature of the righteous One, verse 7: 'He that does righteousness is righteous, even as God is righteous'. You cannot get righteous by obeying rules and trying your best. Peter tells us that we have been made partakers of the divine nature, God has given us His very life, the only life that pleases God is the life of His Son, and He has given us that life by His Spirit. But if you practise unrighteousness, the implication is, that is not natural to God - unrighteousness isn't in His nature. So then it begs the question: who is our father if we are habitually, in a lifestyle, practising sin? John's conclusion is: our father is the devil.

In John 8 and verse 44 the Lord Jesus said the same thing to the Pharisees: 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it'. He's a liar from the beginning, Jesus said, and John says effectively the same in verse 8: 'He that commits sin is of the devil; the devil sinned from the beginning'. The tense there of 'sinned from the beginning' means that the devil's original sin has continued with out a break since it began - isn't that amazing? It's just like one big long sin! What is John trying to say? Are you like the devil or are you like God? What's the devil like? He sinned at the beginning, and he hasn't stopped sinning since - and if you profess faith in Jesus Christ, and you have sinned since your profession in a lifestyle and existence of sin, you don't belong to God, your father is the devil.

Some kids look so much like their parents that you couldn't lose them in a crowd, isn't that true? It's the same with the children of God and the children of the devil, they don't get mixed up - they're recognisable. But here's the crux, literally, of the matter at the end of verse 8: 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the
ST, 2ND AND 3RD JOHN

Pastor David Legge

If you name the name of Christ, and then follow a devilish sinful past, how can it be, if it was Christ coming into the world with the intent to destroy Satan's work that was meant to save you in the beginning? If Christ came into the world with the purpose of destroying the works of the devil, what is to be thought of someone who wishes to carry on the devil's work? The conclusions are obvious, aren't they? John says you're not a child of God.

I don't know whether you're sitting here worried or not - you should be if you're not a child of God - but there is a twofold test to tell us exactly how close we are to the Lord. It's an answer to two questions. First of all: how sensitive are you to sin? You'll know how close you are to the Lord Jesus by how sensitive you are to sin. Secondly: how separate are you from sin? John is saying that the man who is truly saved is abiding in the Lord Jesus, that means he doesn't want to be around sin. You and I both know that the one that you're closest with is the one that you will be most like and become more like, and John is saying that if you're living with Jesus and abiding in Jesus, it's because you're close to Jesus. But if you're living like the devil, what does that mean?

The positive of verse 8 is that Satan has been defeated. Whilst many need to question whether they're truly in the faith or not because they live like the devil their father, and practice habitual sin, isn't it great to be able to say categorically tonight that he has been defeated? If we are under the blood of Christ that He shed on the cross, the devil cannot make us sin. Now I know he can take us unawares, and he can call our bluff from time to time - but a lot of people, even Christians, need to defeat the lie of the devil in their mind and heart that says to them: 'You cannot resist this sin'. I know, it's happened to me, and I'm sure it's happened to you - some people say: 'Ah, I'm just prone to this, or that or the other, that's just my character, that's just my nature'. The devil would make us believe that and contradict what John says by the Holy Spirit, that Christ came to destroy, and has destroyed the works of the devil. 'Destroy' literally means 'to render inoperative', it could be expressed 'to put out of business, to decommission, to undo the devil's work'.

Imagine this: the Lord Jesus had just come down from heaven for a day, and went over and zapped with omnipotent power the devil off the face of the earth, and went back up to heaven - we might live a little bit more happily ever after, but the fact of the matter is He would not have undone what the devil had already done, would He? But He has come to die on the cross, to shed His blood, to be buried, to rise again, and to sit at the right hand of the Father interceding for us to undo everything that the devil has done against us. What a great discovery it is when the child of God realises that they're not fighting for victory and struggling with Satan and sin in the world, but they're fighting in the victory! It's already been purchased, the devil is already defeated at the cross, through the resurrection, and we are the victors and he is the vanquished!

Have you realised that? The devil wants to keep you down there, my friend. Christ has purchased the victory ground for you, and sin need no longer have dominion over you. If it does, ask the question: one, are you really a Christian?; two, do you really know the victory that Jesus has purchased for you?

There was once a US Army General, I think he was in the United States Army, his name was General Wainwright. During World War II he was taken captive by the Japanese, and he was beaten and starved and emaciated. One day a plane landed with the news that the war had ended, and the next day the Japanese, out of sheer habit, came to the compound with the General and started to torture him and beat him as they did every single day. They hadn't recognised that the war had ended, and they were defeated, and the General effectively was
on the victory side. Just as the soldiers came in and started to lay into him, he said: 'Wait a minute! Put down your weapons, I'm in charge! You're my captives!'. They put the weapons down, because that was the fact - what had changed? Nothing had changed, they were in the same environment, the same forces, but what had changed was historical fact: the Allies had won the war. The fact of the matter is this: Christ is the Captain of our salvation, but Satan is the captive! Christ has sapped all his power, and we need no longer be under his control. Whilst the devil, at times, may throw us to the ground - praise God, he cannot pin you to the ground! Oh, that you would hear that tonight.

An habitual sinful lifestyle, finally, displays the lack of the Holy Spirit, verse 9. It is lawlessness, it is a denial of Christ's character and His cross, it betrays an absence of abiding, and it proves our spiritual parentage - but verse 9 tells us it displays the lack of the Holy Spirit. 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God'. Now, there's great debate over what 'his seed remaineth in him' means. Some people view it as the new nature which is imparted to us at salvation, some people believe it is the gift of the Holy Spirit, some believe it's the seed of the word of God - we're not born-again by corruptible seed, but by incorruptible, the word. It means all of those I think, but essentially it means the new life that we have in Christ, the seed of God's life in us. John is saying: if God has put that in us, it will remain in us. There's the verse for people who believe you can be saved one moment and lost the next. Their argument is: 'Well, that's a licence to go out and live as you please' - no, it's not! For John is saying that the evidence that God's life and seed remains in you is a life of holiness and not a life of sinfulness.

In other words, could I sum it up like this: a person who is saved is secure, but he must also be sanctified or he is neither. Did you hear that? A person who is saved is secure, but he must be sanctified or he is neither. Let me put it as the author to the Hebrews did: live peaceably with all men, for without holiness no man shall see the Lord. Ultimately the standard of your lifestyle will be determined by how you view two things that we've looked at tonight: one, how you view sin. Do you see it as lawlessness, verse 4? Do you see it as of the devil, verse 8? But also your view of Christ is so important to have victory over sin: do you see His worth, verse 5? In Him is no sin, and therefore if you take His name you cannot sin. Secondly His work, verse 8, this is why He came into the world, why He died and rose again, why He's at the right hand of God: do you see Christ? Someone has wisely written: 'Every sin a Christian commits, he knows he adds directly to the burden that Christ bore on the cross'. Do we think about that when we sin? 'Every failure to conform to God's standards denies the spiritual victory that Jesus won on the cross, and', he goes on, 'it grants the devil grounds for hope. Nobody who understands why Christ came can possibly live in anything but a state of unceasing war against sin'.

An old Methodist evangelist named Dr Morrison taught the doctrine of perfection in holiness, and some great godly Methodist evangelists there have been. It was said that he came closer, perhaps, to practising the doctrine than many folks do. But someone asked the preacher, a bit with tongue in cheek: 'Dr Morrison, have you reached a point in your life where you cannot sin?'. This is an interesting answer, listen to it, Dr Morrison wisely, with a twinkle in his eye, said: 'No, my brother, I have not yet arrived at such a place; but I can tell you where I am right now. I have come to a place where I sin, but I cannot enjoy it'. Are you in that place? Am I in that place? May we get to that place - but should there be one here that even doubts that they're in Christ, my friend, you doubt your salvation until you're sure.
If you're troubled with habitual sin in your life, and we've all been there, you need to get your eyes now on that crown of thorns, on those nail prints, on that scarred side of the Saviour and realise your sin is what put Him there, my sin. But realise that it was there to cleanse you from it and, my friend, if you can get there by faith and avail by trust of what He did for you, believing that it's sufficient to purge your sins, He will save you, child of God He will restore you. Whatever you do tonight: get there.

Father, after we sin we always ask the question: why did we do it? We thank You that John has taught us if any man sin we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the propitiation for our sins, and not our sins only but for the sins of the whole world. There's many things that we don't know about sin in this life and ourselves, but we thank You that we know this much: at God's right hand there is a Saviour who has defeated sin and Satan, and the world and death and hell. Lord, may we shelter in Him, and may we be known as the children of God, not because of our profession alone but because of our lives - that it may be said of us: 'They walk as He walked'. Take us now to our homes in safety, we pray, in the fellowship and abiding of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - January 2006
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Well we're turning, of course, again to 1 John, the first epistle of John, and this is study
number 10 tonight, and the title is 'Brotherly Love'. Our verses for consideration are
verses 10 through to 18, so let us begin at verse 10 under this title 'Brotherly Love':

"In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not
righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message
that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of
that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works
were evil, and his brother's righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. We
know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth
not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know
that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God,
because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But
whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of
compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love
in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth".

Now as I've told you on previous evenings in this study, particularly in our introductory night
way back at the beginning of September, there's not much structure to the first epistle of
John, and the themes in it are really spiralled right throughout this book - if you like, in the
form of a spiral staircase that tends to widen the further up it goes. So we begin in chapter 1
and chapter 2 of this book with several core cardinal themes that John's going to take right
throughout this book as threads, but each time he revisits it in this spiral he adds another
aspect of truth to it or another application to it. So we're going to find week after week that
we're covering the same ground, but yet we'll have added to us each evening an extra truth
or an embellishment of the original truth. Tonight we're looking again at this great subject of
love, and of course this is an epistle to do with assurance and how we can know that we have
fellowship with God and His Son Jesus Christ.

We've seen that there are three tests within this book whereby we can know that we are the
children of God, we can have assurance. First of all there is the doctrinal test, that we believe
the historical gospel that was revealed at the beginning through the incarnation
of our Lord
Jesus, His death and resurrection, that we believe in the historical Christ and the historical
authentic gospel. Then secondly there is the moral test, we cannot claim to be Christ's-ones
and live ungodly lives as some were doing in John's day - the moral test. Our life has to live
up to what we believe and what Christ taught. But then there is the social test, and that is the
one we're looking at tonight again, and that is that of love towards our brothers specifically in
Christ - and our sisters of course - and indeed love that we are to show to all men.

The last time we visited this theme was in chapter 2 verses 7 to 17, we're not going to look at
those tonight, but it would be good for you to recap at your own leisure and cover that again,
what we have already studied in those verses. But this word 'love' is found fifty times within 1
I think love, as a concept and indeed as a word, is one that, perhaps, has been more abused and misused than any other in our language, or indeed any world language - especially over the last decade. A lot of people don't really know what love is to define or to experience in their own lives and environment. Sadly, love has come to be described in awful terms, some of the most hateful and perverse practices that are known to man today are now being described as 'love'. Things that God has declared to be an abomination, such as sodomy, homosexuality, something that God has pronounced His judgment and condemnation upon, people are describing as love - 'same-sex love'. So you can see how this great word, beautiful word, has been perverted in our day.

Then there are others who maybe wouldn't stretch their definition that far, but understand love as a sentimental sort of fluffly feeling that's akin to butterflies in the tummy - it's an emotion, purely, it is a tendency. Then there are others who see love as agreeing with everyone, being cordial, harmonious, even with others whose cultures and beliefs perhaps don't agree with yours, but yet you accept them and live and let live - they understand that to be love. Then, as we have already mentioned, many are confused today and just see love as raw gratuitous lust. Love, for many, has become lustfulness.

But if we take all those definitions, modern definitions of love, we can see that there's a trend running right throughout them all, and it is simply this: that love in some shape or form is understood as being something that gives you self-gratification. It's something that blesses you, it's something that gives you a buzz, gives you a worthwhile feeling, a sense of gaining and getting - and certainly any concept of self-sacrifice is foreign to the modern understanding of love. I believe this is seen often in how, sometimes, we casually use the word - even as Christians. I might say: 'I love chocolate' - dropping a hint there! You might say: 'I love golf'. The women might say: 'I love shopping'. What you are describing is that those things make you feel good, you get a measure of self-gratification tucking into a bar of Cadbury's, or spending your husband's money - it feels good! You can almost see it as well in the way that people talk about relationships. You hear people talking today about 'Falling in and out of love' - I don't believe you do either of those two things. Some people say that their marriage or their relationship has broken down irretrievably because they've 'fallen out of love'. Now that is cold language, I believe, which means they aren't getting out of that relationship what they feel is their right. They've chosen no longer to love the person because, one way or another, they're not getting their way any longer.

Now that is not the Bible's definition of love. It is not something that revolves around self or self-gratification, but at the very centre - and, ironically we could say, at the crux ('crux' is the Latin word for 'cross', of course) - there is self-sacrifice as the foundation of everything that can be described as love. Now in ancient Greece, in biblical Greek and ancient Greek, there were three or perhaps four definitions for love. One we know today is that of 'eros' describing sexual love and physical love, and we get the word 'erotic' from it. The Greek god 'Eros' takes a personification of this concept, and 'Aphrodite' and many other pagan gods were personifications of this fleshly, lustful love. Incidentally, you will not find the Greek word 'eros' in the New Testament, because sexual love had been degenerated, through this concept of what sexual love ought to be in Greek society and culture, the Holy Spirit never included this word within the Scriptures. It doesn't mean that God is against sexual union, it just means the concept was totally depraved and perverted.
Then there is the Greek word 'filio' which is found in the New Testament, but it describes an affectionate love that could be among friends and brothers. The word for love that we find in John's first epistle, and indeed many times right throughout the New Testament is the Greek word 'agape'. Now turn with me for a moment to 1 Corinthians chapter 13, to the great passage on love and its definition. Here Paul outlines for us what this agape love really is, and he defines it, and that's the word for love that he uses here. Let me read it in a slightly different translation just to bring it home, what is meant here, verse 4, and you can correspond in your own translation where you are: 'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, it always trusts, it always hopes, it always perseveres. Love never fails'. Now agape love is divine love, it is the love of God, it is what God is in His essence. The mighty fact of the portion that we are studying tonight is that this is the very love that we are called upon as Christians to show to our brothers and sisters in the church. This is the love of Christ.

What we could do, if you keep your Bible open at this passage, 1 Corinthians 13, you could substitute - and I've done this with you before - the word 'love' for 'Christ' or 'Jesus'. 'Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. He does not envy, He does not boast, He is never proud. Jesus is not rude, He is not self-seeking, He is not easily angered', so on and so forth. But I wonder how many of us could substitute our names for this word 'love'? 'David Legge is patient' - I'd have to stop right away! 'David Legge is kind, he does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud' - but this is in effect what John is saying. What this agape love is, and this agape love is the love of God that has been displayed and manifested for us in Christ, is the love that we ought to show to one another. Again we could remind ourselves of what John said in chapter 2 and verse 6: 'We ought to walk even as he walked', in every aspect, not least showing that great agape love in our lives. Indeed Paul said in Galatians 5:23 that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance - but love is the fruit of the Spirit, the Spirit of God. If He is in us, He will manifest the love of God.

So what John is saying to us again is that here is a test of whether you're a child of God: do you have this love toward your brothers and sisters? If you do it's a good sign that you're saved, if you don't it's a sure sign that you're not. Verse 10: 'In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother'. It's a test of fellowship, it's something that can give us assurance and confidence that we know God. The presence of it should make us know that we have eternal life, but the absence of it proves that we do not have eternal life. So this is the test that we're looking at tonight, the test of brotherly love.

So let's look at the first aspect that John deals with in verses 10 to 15, and it's simply this: a lack of brotherly love proves an absence of eternal life. A lack of brotherly love proves the absence of eternal life. In verse 11 John reminds them of a command he says they had from the beginning: 'This is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another'. Now, of course, we could go back to Deuteronomy 6 and verse 5 where God commanded in the law that all men should love the Lord their God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind and with all their strength. But I believe what John is referring to here, when he talks of 'at the beginning', is the beginning of the New Testament era when the Lord Jesus was incarnated, and we see that that has been his meaning right throughout up to now. The Lord Jesus, remember, sat with His disciples one day and in John chapter 13 He said that He was giving them a commandment, verse 34: 'A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another'. The
Lord Jesus was commanding them: 'You see the agape love that I have and am going to display for you at the cross, I want you to show that same love to one another'.

Now right away we see that love is more than an airy fairy feeling, it is more an act of our will rather than a feeling. But John doesn't leave it to conjecture for us to conclude what this love is like, but he says to us in verse 12: 'Do not love as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous'. John gives us, first of all, an illustration of what this love is not, what this love is not like. I'm thinking of the Irish man, and somebody from England stops him at the lights, and says 'Can you tell me the way to Belfast?'. He says: 'Well, if you go up that road and turn right, and then turn left again, come to a roundabout, go straight ahead...that's not where it is'. Sometimes we have to get what a thing is not to understand a little bit more about what it is. Here John is showing us, here is an illustration of the proof of the absence of this love, which proves the absence of this life of God.

The example he gives us is Cain. Now in Genesis 3 we have the story of how fellowship between God and man broke down, and then when we come to Genesis 4 we find that the offshoot of the fellowship between God and man breaking down is that man's fellowship with his fellow man breaks down, and Cain slays Abel. Remember Cain was the first baby ever born, and he becomes a murderer. The problem in Cain's heart was simply jealousy or envy, and someone has said it is the most destructive force in the world to be jealous or envious. Ultimately what it was was rebellion towards God, God wanted an offering and Abel came God's way with a little slain lamb, and Cain came his own way with an offering from the fruit of the ground because he was a farmer. God rejected Cain's offering and accepted Abel's - and out of envy and jealousy, because God never accepted Cain's way, he slew his brother.

Now the false teachers in John's day were advocating that the problem for all mankind is ignorance, they need to learn more, they need to get a special knowledge from God. What John is saying here is that that's not man's chief problem - ignorance - man's chief problem is rebellion and sinfulness in their heart towards God. What John is bringing to us as believers is that we ought not to behave like Cain, who was envious and jealous - because that is a sure sign that the love of God is not residing in our hearts, and ultimately that there is a lack of eternal life. Serious stuff. We have to step back for a moment if we are naive, and say: 'Is this possible? That believers could be envious and jealous of one another?' - is it not? I think there are few things today that have hurt the cause of Christ more than this very thing: jealousy, enviousness among God's people. Remember, that's who John is writing to. Whether it's singers envying other singers, churches envying other churches, preachers envying other preachers, elders envying other elders, deacons of deacons, businessmen in the fellowship envying the success of others who are businessmen, professionals, parents envious of children's success, students envious of others academic success - we could go on and on and on, and we begin to appreciate the seriousness of how this thing can multiply to extremes.

I wonder do we really appreciate the seriousness of how bad envy and jealousy can be among God's people, because John is likening it to murder, the murder of Abel by Cain right at the beginning - that first act of murder. Now that word 'slew' in verse 12 literally could be translated 'to butcher' - 'Do not be like Cain, who was of that wicked one, who butchered or slaughtered' - it literally means 'slaughtered by smashing his throat'. Now, what harm does a wee bit of envy or jealousy do from time to time? Do you see the seriousness? John is likening it to murder, to butchery, to slaughter. This is his illustration, an illustration of a lack of brotherly love that proves an absence of eternal life.
But then he moves on from the illustration to give a bit of an explanation why Cain behaved in this way. At the end of verse 12 we read: 'Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous'. 'He was of that wicked one', at the beginning of verse 12 we see, so there are two things that he is citing to us as an explanation for this lack of brotherly love in Cain's experience. The first thing he gives us is the fact that he is of that wicked one, his parentage. We looked at this in more detail last week, but what John is saying is that this proved that Cain was not of God, this characteristic of lack of love. Indeed, this characteristic is a characteristic of the devil himself. Of course, last week we looked at John 8:44 that the devil was a thief and a murderer from the beginning, and here Cain is following in the footsteps of his spiritual father, committing murder.

That's the explanation for why he behaved in this way, why there was a lack of love. He wasn't a child of God, he was a child of the devil! That's what the Lord said to the Pharisees: 'Ye are of your father, the devil; and the works of your father ye will do'. Not only was there his parentage, but there were his practices. He was not only of the wicked one, but he practiced wickedness because his own works were evil and his brother's righteous. We ask the question: did Abel do something on him? Had he wronged him? Was there a reason for Cain slaying Abel? The simple answer is that he was hostile towards Abel for no other reason than that Abel was right with God and Cain was not. That was all the reason Cain needed to hate him and to murder him - a sure sign he wasn't a child of God.

The illustration is Cain, the explanation is his parentage - he was of the wicked one, his practices were wickedness - but thirdly he gives us, like every good preacher, an application. He gives us several reasons how we can know whether or not we are truly a child of God. He says in verse 13: 'Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you'. If you are truly a child of God, the world will hate you. You see, this is not just the mark of one who is of the devil, to hate believers and to slay and murder believers, but it's the mark of this whole unbelieving world. Indeed, if you were to turn to John's gospel and chapter 15, the Lord Jesus Christ spoke originally on this same vein. He says in verse 18: 'If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you'.

Matthew Henry noted well in his commentary on this verse: 'The great serpent himself reigns as the god of this world. Wonder not then that the serpentine world hates and hisses at you who belong to that seed of the woman that is to bruise the serpent's head'. Does the world hate you? I don't mean everybody in the world, but is there a general principle, because of the life that you live and the stand that you take as one of Christ's children, it hates you - that's a sign that you've got God's life in you! But a sure sign that you haven't is that you're going the whole way of the world, and they think you're it's best buddy.

A second application of how we can know we are truly a child of God is found in verse 14, the first part of it: 'We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren' - you love your brothers and your sisters in Christ. First of all, let me point out from the beginning of verse 14 that you can know, and that puts the lie to those who say you can't really know and be sure of your salvation. That's what this epistle is all about, and here he is repeating it again: 'Hereby we can know that we have this eternal life'. That fact is not as difficult to discern as this love in the life of some people who call themselves Christians. You can know that you have eternal life, but it's hard to know as you observe the life of people who profess Christianity whether or not they really love their brothers and sisters. John comes in here speaking of this lack of brotherly love that proves an absence of eternal life, and he
Pastor David Legge

says: 'If you don't love your brothers', verse 14 the second part of it, 'you're still dead', for a love for brothers is a sure sign that you've passed from death unto life. But if you don't love your brethren, you're still dead!

This is serious stuff. John is saying that where there is no love there is no life. It doesn't matter whether you apply that fact to the home, or you apply it to the church; if you're in a home or a church where there is no love, it's a sure sign that there's a lack of life - you're dead! Now, our natural spiritual state before we're converted is death. In John chapter 5 the Lord Jesus said that when we believe the Gospel we pass from death unto life, Ephesians 2 verse 1, ye who were once dead in your trespasses and in your sins have now been made alive unto God. In this same epistle in chapter 2 and verse 11 he's already stated that not only are we dead, but we're in the dark: 'He that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes'. A loveless man, John is saying, is a lightless man - he can't see his way. A loveless man is not only a lightless man, but he is a lifeless man - and ultimately the only conclusion you can come to is that a man without light and a man without love is a man who is lost!

Now I know, and I agree to differ with some who see this portion of Scripture outlining primarily the two natures of the Christian; but I believe that the sentiments here are too strong, because John, time after time after time, is telling us that these people who have an absence of these characteristics are proving that they do not have the life of God in them - and your old nature can never have the life of God in it. My friend, what John is saying is that if you have a lack of love towards your brothers it proves an absence of eternal life. You're still dead, and then he says in verse 15 at the beginning: 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him'. Not only are you still dead if you hate your brother, but you're a murderer like Cain, John says.

Now I know how people react to these types of verses, they'll be saying to themselves: 'I've never shot anybody, or slit anybody's throat' - but what John's doing is he is echoing what the Lord Jesus has already taught in Matthew's gospel and chapter 5 at the Sermon on the Mount - which, incidentally, is as much for us as it is for anybody. Chapter 5 and verse 21: 'Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire'. John is saying the same: that if there is a similar lack of love, it's a sure sign that you do not have eternal life. You might not have used a dagger on anybody, but John is talking about looking daggers at your neighbours, at your friends, at your brothers and sisters in Christ. You may never have shed any blood, you may never have lifted your hand against another, but have you ever snubbed a brother in Christ or a sister? Have you ever scandalised? Have you ever passed on rumour? Have you ever resented another believer in Christ? It may not be the act of murder. What John is getting at and what the Lord Jesus was speaking of in His great sermon was the murderous heart. You don't have to commit the act to have a murderous heart, because God is not as much concerned with the outward appearance as He is with the heart. You see, when the Almighty God of heaven sees hate, do you know what He cries? 'Murder!'. When He sees lust, He cries 'Adultery!' - because lust is the seed of adultery, and hate and anger are the seed of murder. To God, in His holy eyes, hate is the moral equivalent of the murderous act, hate is the embryo of murder.

Now, maybe that's why we don't take it as seriously as murder, but that's why God does. I want to ask you tonight: you call yourself a Christian, do you have a grudge against another
brother? Don't misunderstand what I'm saying, I'm not saying that if you've been angry with somebody at some time, or you've fallen out with them, that you're on your way to hell - we all get angry with one another from time to time, like any family, and we all fall out with each other now and again. But just as we were looking at last week, John is talking about those who commit sin and the word is 'a continuous habitual lifestyle of sin', and if you have a continual habitual grudge against some brother or sister in Christ, John says you need to beware. If this is something that you're holding onto, if it is a lifestyle of hate, you need to beware - why? Because, just as the Lord Jesus said again in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 and verse 15, 'If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses'. Oh, we skite over that one very quickly! We're all for free grace, grace is free! I know it's free, but not at any price - forgive your brother, or you'll not be forgiven of God.

A deacon in a church on one occasion had a grudge against another deacon - I don't know whether that ever happens or not these days - but he had even forgotten what the grudge was over. That's often the case, but he was still not going to forgive his brother. The deacon with the grudge sadly took sick, and he was lying on his deathbed, and all the other deacons bar one came to see him. They said: 'Dear brother, you're not going to go into eternity with this grudge in your heart, are you? Do you know that God doesn't want to meet you with a grudge towards another brother, an unforgiveness in your soul - why don't you let us go away from here and tell the other brother deacon that you've forgiven him?'. The deacon said: 'Did the doctor really say that I was going to die?'. They said 'Aye, he did'. He said: 'Well, you go off and tell him that I've forgiven him, but remember: if I get better the deal's off'. Friends, that's the way we behave, isn't it, sometimes, towards our brethren? Even when we do speak words of forgiveness, it's not deep down in our heart. We see that here in this verse, if you look at it again, verse 15, he changes from talking about 'brethren' that he talked about in verse 14 in the plural to talking about the singular 'brother' in verse 15. It's not just a grudge against a group of people, or a denomination, or a sect, it could be a grudge against one individual. My friend, there could be a hundred Christians that you know, and you love 99 of them, and there's just one that you hate - and John says if you hate that one you're in deep spiritual trouble! Now don't shoot me at the door, I'm only the messenger, this is God's word, take it or leave it!

If you don't love your brother, you're still dead, you're a murderer like Cain, and he says at the end of verse 15 you do not possess eternal life. Now that doesn't mean that murderers can't be saved, but you can't be forgiven of any sin of murder whether in your heart or on your hands, and then continue to hate your brother. Remember that the Lord Jesus, when He appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus in Acts chapter 9, what does the Lord Jesus say to Paul, the one who persecuted and chased with murderous breath the children of God? He says: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?' - are you persecuting a child of God? You're persecuting Christ! Even as a Christian...and it's a sure sign that you don't possess eternal life.

A lack of brotherly love proves an absence of eternal life, he gives us the illustration: Cain. He gives us the explanation: it was Cain's parentage of the wicked one, his practices of wickedness. He gives us the application to us: if we are truly children of God the world will hate us too, we will love our brothers - but if we're not, we'll still be dead in our sins, murderers like Cain, and we don't even possess eternal life no matter what we say.

Then we must move on quickly to the positive aspect of things that John deals with, because he says that demonstrating brotherly love proves the presence of eternal life, verses 16 to 18.
He gives us another illustration in contrast to that of Cain, and it is our blessed Lord Jesus. Verse 16: 'Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he', the Lord Jesus Christ, 'laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren'. He gives us the illustration par excellence: Christ is the only source of true agape love, John is saying, and Calvary is the only measure and standard of that love. I don't know whether you've ever noticed, but the New Testament hardly ever mentions the love of God that it does not speak also, or at least the context speaks also of the cross of our Lord Jesus. Take John 3:16 for instance: 'For God so loved the world, that he', what?, 'He gave his only begotten Son'. Galatians 2:20, Paul says: 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me'. Romans 5 and verse 8: 'God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'. Even in this epistle again another place, as we'll see in subsequent weeks, chapter 4 and verse 10, John says: 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins'.

The love of God is epitomised in Christ, perfected in Christ, and the greatest standard and expression and measure of that love is Calvary. Now what is it that gives the love of God at the cross its character? What is it? It is primarily the element of self-sacrifice, that He is dying there for us, not for Himself, for us, for the undeserving, for the iniquitous, the transgressors, the sinful, those totally unworthy. It is voluntarily - He lays His life down, John says, voluntarily. It is vicarious, He lays His life down for us - 'huper' (sp?) is the Greek word, 'on our behalf, in place of, as a substitute'. This, John says, is the supreme definition and illustration of love, and that's the love that we ought to show to one another. So he comes from this great illustration in Christ to the application, and that application is an obligation to everyone who names the name of Christ. Here's what he says: a true child of God will display the love of Christ first of all, verse 16, in laying down their lives for the brethren. Now, we all know well John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son', and we've memorised that one - but one I'm sure you have never memorised, let alone exemplified, is 1 John 3:16: 'We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren'. Not a popular verse today!

This expression 'lay down the life' is used many times in John's writings - John 10, 11 and 15. Chapter 10 and verses 11 and 15 talk about the shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. He talks later on in John 13, as He lays aside His towel to wash the disciples' feet, in verses 37 to 38 He talks again about laying down His life, and them laying down their lives for each other. Not only did He lay down His human life here on earth, but we go back into the eternity of past and we see in Philippians 2 that here He comes from the right hand of God, and He lays aside the grasping at divine power. He didn't lay aside His attributes, but He thought it not something to be grasped at, and relinquished them voluntarily as He came to earth to live as a man - why? Out of love! Then Paul says: 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus'. The supreme act of love, John says in John 15:13, 'Greater love hath no man than this, but that a man lays down his life for his friends'.

You know, this literally happened in the early church, I mean literally laying down their lives for one another. Christians used to be arrested, and they were required to give up the names of their associate Christians, and if they didn't they would suffer and die. The true Christian, this is John's point, at that point would be content to suffer and even die rather than cause suffering or pain or death to his brethren. If you go to Romans 16, you find that Priscilla and Aquila put their neck on the line for the apostle Paul, and he counted it as a great act of love and commends them for it. Can I ask you tonight: do you know many people who would put
their lives on the line for you? I don't know many. Would you put your life on the line for someone else? The message of John is: if Jesus loved you enough to die for you, you ought to love your brothers enough to live for them! While self-preservation is the first law of physical life, self-sacrifice is the first law of the spiritual life. How many of us tonight can say, including me:

'Lord, let me live from day to day
In such a self-forgetful way,
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayers shall be of others.

Others, Lord, yes others,
Let this my motto be:
Let me live for others,
That I may live like Thee'.

Do you know what's nearer the truth? Many want to lay down the lives of their brethren, rather than to lay down their lives for their brethren. A sad fact is that conflicts and battles are what mark many an assembly of God's people in the 21st century. I know they're portrayed as being doctrinal disputes, but most of the time they're just personality struggles fuelled by jealousy, fuelled by envy - and they're singing praise, one on one side of the church and one on the other, and they're sworn enemies as they praise to God with their tongues! John says this ought not to be, and whether it's a denominational envy, or jealousy, or hate, whether it's pastoral pride or Christian professional competitiveness, it ought not to be! We are to lay down our lives for our brothers, whoever they are and wherever they hang their hat.

If we're to demonstrate brotherly love that proves the presence of eternal life we need to lay down our lives, but we need to meet the known needs of our brothers. Verse 17: 'Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?'. That could be translated, 'If we possess life', 'bios', we get 'biology' from it, that is the life of the world. If you possess things that give you life and sustenance, material possessions, worldly goods, but refuse to share them - the Authorised says 'shut up the bowels of compassion', and that is a literal translation because the bowels, the intestines were understood in the ancient world to be the seat of affections, the way we use the word 'heart' today. We don't talk about the big red thing that beats in our chest, we talk about the seat of our emotions. But literally what he's saying is, if we possess material possessions and shut down our feelings for the need of others and those who are in need, we're not giving real life 'zoa', a different word, to those who are suffering and the love of God cannot be in us.

Now, probably none of us will ever be called to die for someone else, that's very rare these days - at least in Europe. It can only happen once, once we've given our life we haven't got another one to give, but John is saying we are daily called to live for others, to meet known needs. Now here are three things that are necessary: one, you need to have the means to meet a need, so don't get guilty if you don't have the means, you're the one that is in need. Secondly, you have to have your eyes open to see the needs - and I think that's half the problem. People are oblivious to needs that may be around them. Thirdly, you have to have a willingness, once you see the needs and have the means to meet them, to do the deed and help that person. John is only saying what James said in James chapter 2 and verse 15, he gives an example: 'If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you
1ST, 2ND AND 3RD JOHN

Pastor David Legge

1ST JOHN

say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone'.

How often does it happen? A brother comes into the meeting, and he's in great need, and somebody pats him on the back and says: 'We'll pray for you brother, the Lord bless you, safe home'. Now I know we don't throw money at everybody coming, sometimes that would harm people and do them less good than it ought - but here's a brother coming into James' church, and he doesn't have any clothes and he doesn't have any shelter, he doesn't have any food and he doesn't have a job. James is saying, just as John, if you close your hand to him, and if you close your home to him, and if you close your heart to him, how does the love of God dwell in you? How can we say the love of God abides in us?

The early church were renowned for their love. The Emperor Hadrian of Rome, in the early second century, called a man called Aristides to the palace to have him describe what Christians really were like. This is what he said, I quote: 'They love one another. They never fail to help widows, they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing. If they see a stranger they take him home and are happy as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Holy Spirit of God'. Not only were they renowned for doctrinal purity, but early Christians were renowned for practical charity. Again the Emperor Julian the Apostate complained during his short reign from AD 361 to 363 that, I quote: 'The impious Galileans', another name for Christians, 'support not only their own poor, but ours as well!'.

If we lived like that today, our Christianity, just like the early church, would be infectious, it would be contagious, it would explode, it would mushroom. Our problem is we live in a day where we have a social welfare state, and it's easy for many Christians to forget and disregard their obligations. If you ask anybody why they work today, they'll say: 'It's to feed my family, my wife and my kids', but they don't even conceive that it is also to feed and supply the family of God - and it is! In Ephesians 4:28 Paul says: 'Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth'.

Demonstrating brotherly love proves the presence of eternal life. We have an obligation to lay down our lives for the brothers, to meet known needs of our brothers, and thirdly and finally: we are to love in action rather than in words alone, verse 18, that's a sure sign that we are the children of God - without it we cannot be. 'My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth'. Two Christians were at an evangelism conference on one occasion. During one of the sessions Larry missed Pete, and at lunch he said: 'I missed you at 10 o'clock, it was a really good session'. Pete said: 'Well, I was talking to the bellboy, I actually led him to the Lord Jesus'. There you have the theory and practice! Where are we there? Do we express sincerity through practicality? Are we all mouth, all talkie-talkie and very little walkie-walkie? Who here tonight doesn't subscribe to the precept that we have to love one another? Sure, it's probably the most popular doctrinal belief of the whole lot. Nobody would fall out with you over that one! Love one another! But how many of us practice it, and practice it like John is propounding? How much does this agape love impact on our personal lives, in our own backyard, when our own back door is closed?

Someone has said: 'To love the world to me is no chore, my big trouble is the man next door'. Maybe it's not the man next door, maybe it's the man or the woman in the next pew. That's
your problem, isn't it? My friend, if that is your problem, that is a big problem, a big problem. You need to take that problem to God, because that thing, if it's habitual, if it's a lifestyle with that person, could be telling you that you're out of fellowship with God. Rather you should have in your life the attributes of Christ: when He was reviled, He reviled not again. David Jackman in his commentary, and with this I finish, speaks of one of the loveliest Christians he ever met, Dr Kenneth Moynihan was his name, and for years he was a missionary doctor in Rwanda. His life, it was said, was filled with the fragrance of Christ. David Jackman says that on the few occasions he met him he sensed most powerfully the love of Christ in God's servant. After he died a poem of his was published, and it took the ninefold fruit of the Spirit from the book of Galatians that I mentioned to you at the beginning, and made them a kind of character study of the Lord Jesus - because that's what they are, they're the characteristics of the Lord Jesus Christ within the Christian. Here's how the poem went, listen very carefully:

'Joy is love exalting, and peace is love at rest,
Patience is love enduring in every trial and test.
Gentleness is love yielding to all that is not sin,
Goodness is love in actions that flow from Christ within.
Faith is love's eyes opened, the living Christ to see,
Meekness, love not fighting, but bowed at Calvary.
Temperance is love in harness, and under Christ's control,
For Christ is love in person, and love, Christ in the soul'.

Do you have brotherly love? If you don't, or if you hate your brother, it's a sure sign that you lack eternal life. But if you love your brother, even imperfectly at times, it's a sign that you have the life of God in you - but let us all ask ourselves tonight: how much of that Christlike love is seen in me?

'All His compassion and purity;
O Thou Saviour divine,
All my nature refine,
Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me'.

O our Father, help us to understand that we are required and obligated to follow peace with all men, for without holiness no man shall see the Lord. Our Father, help us to realise tonight, even as evangelical Christians, that without works faith is dead. Make us a people who love. Lord, it's not easy, we've all wronged others and there's many a time we've been wronged and we've felt it very keenly. Lord, it's the hardest thing I think, perhaps, in all the Christian life to forgive - but Lord, unless we forgive, You've told us we cannot know fellowship. So we pray tonight that folk in this gathering, that all of us, will be done with grudges, will be done with keeping scores and records of wrongs. Give us that love that is nothing but the love of Jesus, that when He is hated He says 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. Give us that spirit we pray, and none other, for His name's sake we ask it, Amen.
We're turning to 1 John chapter 3, and beginning our reading tonight, I think we should begin at verse 10 - although the verses that we'll consider this evening are verse 19 to 24 at the end of the chapter, but we need to read, I think, the verses that we considered last week just to get the flow of John's thought. So beginning at chapter 3 and verse 10, and our title this evening is 'Confident Christianity'.

Verse 10: "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous. Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us".

If you look at verse 19, where we begin our study, we read that John says: 'Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him'. How do we know? Well, he has spent many verses that we studied last week from verse 10 through to verse 18, explaining to us that one of the tests of whether we belong to Christ are not, one of the tests of whether we are in fellowship with Him, and the test that ought to give assurance to our hearts is whether or not we love our brothers and sisters in the faith. So in verse 19, John is reiterating this as we begin another section, telling us: if we love our brethren, that assures our hearts in the presence of God, it gives us assurance and more certainty that we are God's children. But of course, the antithesis is true, the opposite: if we do not love our brothers, or if we hate one brother in particular, that is an assurance that we are not a child of God. It is a cause not to assure our hearts, but to cause us to doubt our hearts.

I wonder is there anyone in our gathering this evening, and perhaps over the last number of weeks study in 1 John you have been caused to doubt whether or not you're a child of God? Well, some doubts are well-grounded and some doubts are ill-founded. I want first, in introduction, to deal with each of those briefly. When I say that some doubts are well-
grounded, what I mean is: if you hate your brother, and that has caused you to doubt whether or not you are saved, it may be because you are not saved. It may not simply just be a hate or a murderous spirit towards your brother, but we saw in previous portions of this little book that if you are engaged in an habitual, continual, constant lifestyle of sin, that is a sure sign that you're not a child of God. So many doubts that people have in their heart about salvation are well-grounded, particularly this one of hating our brethren. We need to remember what we looked at in verse 15 of chapter 3 last week: 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him'. Now John has a goal, he wants those who are not genuine to realise it, and to start to doubt their salvation for the one sole purpose that they might be sure of their salvation.

Now some believe that when John says in verse 20 of our text tonight: 'God is greater than our heart and knows all things', that that is speaking of the fact that if we think our sins are bad, and if we're starting to doubt our salvation because we realise that we have a murderous, hateful spirit towards our brother, or there's a root of sin within our soul of an habitual lifestyle of iniquity before God; if we think our sins are bad, God is greater, and God is holy, and God sees our sins infinitely worse than we see them through His eyes of righteousness, His all-holy eyes that cannot look upon iniquity. So if that's you tonight, and you have been doubting your salvation, and your heart is condemning you, and it is a well-grounded doubt because you have constant sin in your life, or you have hatred towards another brother in Christ, I want you to analyse that doubt - don't get rid of it! Face it! As Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:19: 'The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity'. Your doubting heart, your condemning heart should be a warning to you - as we find in 2 Peter 1 verse 10 - to 'give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall'.

If your heart is condemning you, the first thing you ought to do is - as Paul said to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 13:5 - 'Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves'. Whilst we'll be talking tonight about confident Christianity, and spend the majority of our time talking about ill-founded doubts that people have in their heart concerning their salvation, let's not quickly overlook the fact that many may have hearts that are condemning them and doubts about their salvation, because they're not saved! Because they are failing in these outward tests of the signs of divine life in their soul! The doctrinal test: that they believe the truth concerning the Son of God. The moral test: that they are obeying His commandments. The social test: that they love their brethren. My friend, if that is you, I urge you with all my heart: make sure, if you're not sure tonight, that you're a child of God! Your doubts may be well-grounded.

But then there are those doubts that are ill-founded. It may be that we are His, we are child of God, but we have failed Him. Whilst it may not be a lifestyle of constant failure and habitual sin, there has been a blip and a blot on our testimony. Because of that, whether we consider it to be a small hiccup or a large fall, we have a bad conscience toward God - and it causes us from time to time, or maybe constantly, to doubt our salvation. I would have to say after our study last week in verses 10 to 18, reading and studying in depth that portion, it would be easy to come away and say: 'Am I saved at all? How guilty I have been of being an unloving Christian, an uncaring Christian! I have not laid my life down for the brethren the way that John is exhorting us to do. I have shut up my emotions when I have been faced with the needs of others, my brothers and sisters in Christ and those outside the church. I have been guilty of loving in word, loving in language, but not loving in deed and in truth'.
Now let's be honest with one another, and honest with God: all of us, at some time or another, have been guilty of these things. Whilst we agree that these ought to be exceptions rather than the rule in the Christian life, we are all guilty of being unloving towards our brethren in Christ. But here's where the problem arises: if you have an oversensitive conscience, you can read passages of Scripture like this and listen to preaching that we've been hearing week after week, biblically based, and you can begin to say to yourself, 'I'm not truly saved', or 'There's a cause for doubt' - when there is no cause for doubt because you're a child of God. Your sensitive conscience can actually begin to do the devil's work for him. Some of you, perhaps, are having self-incriminating doubts, and it makes you feel condemned in your heart. It's wrong, because God has not condemned you if you're one of His children! Maybe even that bad conscience, that condemning heart is preventing you from approaching God. You feel unworthy to such an extent that you feel that you can't come into God's presence, even though it is not God who has condemned you, God has not barred you from approaching Him, but it's your own heart that makes you feel that way. Whilst there are those, as we've said, who have well-grounded doubts, and their heart condemns them for good reason, I believe that John here now in these verses - 19 to 24 - is speaking to those who have ill-founded doubts. This is the problem he's addressing.

So first of all in verse 20, he speaks to the condemned Christian. He says: 'For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things'. So let's deal first of all this evening with the condemned Christian. Now pastors and evangelists always find it - at least I speak for myself - much easier to deal with those who know they're saved, or those who know they're not saved, rather than those who aren't sure. The difficulty comes in pastoral counselling when you get people who think they're saved, and it's blatantly obvious they're not saved, and others who doubt their salvation when they have every reason to believe that they probably are converted. Now John's epistle is all about assurance, as we've already seen, and John has not only been exposing false teachers whose salvation should be doubted, but he's seeking to bring assurance to the true sheep of God in these churches who have been influenced by the false teaching of the false teachers and are beginning to doubt their salvation because of what they have been saying.

Now John was a compassionate pastor, we know that because as he went through this epistle he keeps addressing his church as 'Beloved'. He realises that on the one hand, when you're preaching and you're trying to expose those who are guilty of false assurance, that you can inadvertently cause genuine believers to doubt their assurance that is well-founded. That's always a danger when you're preaching on this subject of assurance. I never forget having a personal experience of this, but on the other side of things. When I was at an evangelistic crusade in a well-known church in East Belfast, and the evangelist was on fire, it would seem, and he was preaching searing messages. But in this particular message that I was listening to that Lord's Day morning, he was preaching against various means that evangelicals have of responding to the Gospel message - i.e. the altar call, putting your hand up, praying the sinner's prayer, signing a decision card, and so on and so forth. He was pronouncing that they were false, they were an addition to the Gospel, and what you needed to do was believe only that Jesus died for you, repent of your sin, and have faith. What this evangelist did, effectively, he had the whole church doubting whether they were saved or not. I'm not exaggerating here, because I - and forgive me for this, I'm sure the Lord will - kept my eyes open during the appeal, and even the elders of the church had their hands up, the office bearers of the church had their hands up, not realising why they had their hands up - and then he pronounced to them 'You're not converted!'.
Now John is wanting to guard against this: yes, he wants to uncover, in the hearts of men, false assurance; the false assurance that these false teachers had, spreading their lies; the false assurance that some of these believers may have, if they believed their lies - but what he does not want to do is create a bad conscience in a true child of God. That's where we are tonight. What many do not realise, and the trap that I think some of these believers fell into, is that a lack of assurance does not necessarily mean that you have a lack of salvation. Sometimes as evangelicals we can propound that if you're saved, that you should know that you're saved - and that's true, you should know that you're saved. But just because you don't, at a present moment, have an assurance, does not necessarily mean that you aren't saved - just as an assurance doesn't necessarily mean that you are saved. Your problem may not be a lack of salvation, it may simply be a lack of fellowship. That lack of fellowship can be because of what John calls a bad conscience, or a condemning heart. It could be that you have a guilty conscience for something that you have done, or for hatred toward your brethren as we've been uncovering last week - but it could also mean that you have an over-sensitive conscience.

Now the question naturally arises from that: can we, as Christians, trust our conscience? I wonder what you would say to that question this evening. Can we trust our conscience? Jiminy Cricket would say: 'Always let your conscience be your guide'. Is that good theology? Well, we need, as Christians, to beware of mistaking or supposing that our conscience, when it speaks, is the voice of God. Now certainly our conscience is a gift from God to men, but our fingers and our feet are gifts of God to men - yet our fingers can steal, and our feet can lead us astray. We would do well always to remember that our conscience, under many evil influences, can impose cruelties and sins that have been perpetrated not only in individual lives, but in churches and religions right throughout the history of humanity.

If you'll turn with me, let me illustrate it from Acts chapter 26 for a moment, in the life of Paul the apostle when he was Saul of Tarsus before his conversion. He's relating his testimony, and he says in Acts chapter 26 and verse 9 that, in his unconverted state, persecuting the church, he was obeying his conscience. Acts 26 verse 9: 'I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth'. He thought within himself that he was doing that which was right. Now, when we turn two chapters back to chapter 24 and verse 16, now in his regenerate days he describes: 'Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void to offence toward God, and toward men'. Now on both occasions he is exercising his conscience and obedience to it, but we see that before his conversion there was an evil influence on his conscience that he mistook as being God's influence. Now he's converted, he knows better.

So we need to realise that our consciences are not the voice of God, and we need not always heed our conscience as being such. The Bible teaches us that our conscience can be seared when we despise it, when we don't listen to it, when we drown out its voice, when we plug our ears to what it is telling us. God says we can sear it, and cauterize it, and sterilise it, until it is no longer effective. Sometimes we can just dull our conscience down, not listen to it - like when the alarm clock goes off in the morning, you turn it off and put it on 'snooze' about five times, we can do that with our conscience and persistently ignore it until we don't hear it any longer and sleep through it. We could be ignorant in our conscience because we have not been educated in the word of God and, because our conscience has not been regulated by the teaching of the Scriptures, our conscience can be in error - and that's what the Lord Jesus said to the religious teachers of His day in Matthew 22:29: 'Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures'. They thought they were obeying God, but they were ignorant of the true teaching of the word of God - it was not regulating their conscience.
John Milton, in his great work 'Paradise Lost', calls the conscience 'the umpire of the soul'. Any of you who watch football or cricket will know that umpires and referees are mistaken more often than not! It is the same with our conscience: if we are ignorant of the rules of the game, we can make mistakes when we follow what our conscience tells us. So, what is the answer? Well, the key is simply this: our conscience, in and of itself, is not bad, but we must train our conscience. The way we train it is to constantly expose it to the truth of the Bible. It was Martin Luther who said: 'My conscience is captive to the word of God'. Now listen, this is so important, especially if you find yourself to be one of these condemned Christians, a person with a guilty conscience, a true child of God that has a condemning heart, a bad conscience. Now it is one of the best gifts that God can give a man, to have a sensitive conscience - but you must always remember to temper your conscience by the teaching of God's word. Regulate your conscience by the Scriptures. Now here is why: because the devil can use your sensitive conscience as a weapon in his hand, as the great accuser of the brethren, to condemn you and to rob you of your confidence toward God.

Now if we were to ask the question: what is the specific truth that regulates a sensitive conscience? We find it at the end of verse 20: 'God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things'. Now if you are conscious in your life of a momentary failure, of a partial transgression - at some time in your Christian experience you have let the Lord down, and you're continually reminded of it, and through it you have a condemnation attitude toward yourself, a bad conscience - does that mean that you no longer love the Lord? Does that mean that you have forfeited His grace, you no longer have a claim upon His name, that He's letting you go and maybe you're not even saved at all? Now listen, here's the answer, this is what John is trying to say: first of all, what you need to do is what we studied in chapter 1 and verse 9, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. Now let me take you to one Bible character that illustrates this well. You remember Peter, and how often he let the Lord Jesus down. I want to bring you to that scene in John 21, where Peter is at that after-breakfast interview with the risen Lord. You remember that he denied the Lord Jesus in the courtyard three times with oaths and curses. Now, over this fire on which their breakfast had been cooked, through the smoke and the rising embers, the Lord Jesus Christ pierces his eyes with His holy eyes, and three times asks the question: 'What is the real nature of your love, Peter? You have denied me three times, and three times I'm asking you: Simon Peter, lovest thou Me? Lovest thou Me? Lovest thou Me?'. At that third question, Peter breaks down and blurts out these heartbroken words: 'Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee'. Now the import of this: Peter knew that the Lord knew what he did in betraying Him, sure the Lord had prophesied it! As the Lord was being taken away, Peter out of the corner of his eye saw Him looking towards him, and their eyes met. Can you imagine the condemnation that Peter felt, as he met Christ's eyes and as he heard the cockcrow, and as he goes away knowing that he's betrayed his Lord who he said that he would die for and follow to the grave? Peter knows that the Saviour knows all about him, more than he could ever know; but he also knew that the Saviour knew he loved Him. Now I want you to get that: though our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and He knows all things. Though you have a heart that is condemned tonight, maybe a bad conscience toward God because of
something that you have done, God knows about that thing! He knows more about your sinful iniquity than you do, my friend - but God also knows if you really love Him! Deep down, underneath all of that condemnation, He knows if you're His and you love Him.

It's not that God minimises or disregards our failures, He knows them better than we know them. Yet the amazing thing is that this God acquits us, even though He does know them. Here's the big question that John is trying to get to: why then should we listen to our condemning heart? If God is greater than our heart, and God knows all about us and what we've done, yet God still undertakes to forgive us our sins, why should we listen to our condemning heart? He, our God, is the just One and the Justifier of those who believe in Jesus. Am I speaking, tonight, to a Christian, and you got a condemning heart, and you're harder on yourself than God is? You hammer yourself constantly, because you've an oversensitive conscience; and you allow the devil to latch onto, perhaps, sins that were legitimate sins, but that Christ has forgiven you for a long, long time ago - but you still have this condemning heart that you won't let go of, and you're harder on yourself than the Almighty is! Oh, you need to hear this tonight: God is greater than your heart. He knows all things!

Turn with me to Romans chapter 8, till I show you your position in the Lord Jesus in spite of what your condemning heart may feel. Romans 8 and verse 31: 'What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?'. Your condemning heart can't be against you if God is for you! If God is for us, 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth'. God is the Judge! God is the Prosecutor! Here we see in verse 33 that for the child of God, no matter how they feel condemned in their heart, there is no charge coming from God! Verse 34: 'Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us'. The judge condemns us, but not only is there no prosecutor with a charge, but there's no judge condemning us for Christ is the only one who can condemn us, the only one without sin who can cast the first stone at us - yet He is the one who died for us, He's not going to condemn us!

Verse 35: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?'. The prosecutor can't charge, the judge cannot judge against us, and therefore there'll be no jailer coming to the dock and taking us away to separate us from the love of God in Christ. It cannot be done, my friend! You need to hear this tonight: no matter what way your heart is feeling, however sensitive your conscience is, how much it condemns you - God has forgiven you if you're a child of God! If God does not condemn you, why should you condemn yourself?

'There is therefore now', Romans 8 verse 1, 'no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus'. Can I also say to you: if you are a condemned Christian, and your heart condemns you, that is proof positive - in my book at least - that your heart is alive to God. Something without life is not sensitive to God, it's not sensitive to guilt. It's like when people sometimes come to me, and say: 'Oh, I'm afraid that I've committed the unpardonable sin, I'm really worried' - whatever that sin may or may not be, they're worried that they have committed it. Usually I say to those people: 'Well, I can assure you haven't committed it, because you wouldn't be sitting here worried about it if you did'. Are you sensitive tonight, maybe oversensitive, maybe with a bad conscience, a condemning heart because of something you've done in the past? As we've been going through these studies about assurance, and how you can know you're in fellowship, you've started to doubt and the sins have come to the
surface once more. You're fearful, and maybe the devil is latching hold on it - John is saying: 'Be careful, and remember this - whatever you are or are not guilty of - if you're a child of God, God is greater than your heart and He knows all things about you, yet He still receives you and He still loves you, and more than that: He knows if you truly love Him'.

That should make us rejoice - whilst we rejoice that though our hearts condemn us God does not, that is somewhat, I feel, of a cold comfort when we realise that God's intention, as this little book tells us, is that we should have confidence towards God. God doesn't want us to feel condemned, even though when we do He's greater and He forgives us, and so on - He wants us to have engendered within us, through the truths of the word of God, a confidence toward Him. So you should be asking tonight, if you have had a condemned heart: 'How do I move from being a condemned Christian, to a confident Christian?'. That's John's desire, and it's my desire to get you to that point just now. Here is the import of his message in verses 20 and 21, and right to the end of verse 24: though we fall from time to time as Christians, the Master knows truly if we love Him. But here's the secret: if we are to know - it's alright God knowing everything, God knowing that we are His - but if we are to know that we are His, and we're to have confidence and assurance in ourselves, we need to, as quick as possible, take our bad conscience to the blood of Christ, as chapter 1 says, confess our sins, chapter 1 verse 9, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, to restore us to fellowship - and then, if we are to know that we are the children of God after doing that, we need to keep ourselves from falling. That's the secret. If you want to be a confident Christian: you confess your sin, repent of it, and keep yourself from falling - of course, it's the power of God that does that, but you know what I'm saying.

So let us look at this confident Christian that we find in verses 21 to 24: 'Beloved', verse 21, 'if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God'. If your heart is condemned, you bring your heart to God and you believe the Bible truth of the Gospel that the precious blood of the Lamb is able to cleanse you from all sin, you confess your sin, and you seek - as Paul said - to have a conscience void of offence to men and to God. If you do that, take it to Calvary, confess it, repent of it, and desire to have a conscience void of offence toward God and men: you will develop a God-given confidence in your Christian life. Do you have that tonight? Where in that progression of things have you gone wrong? Where have you stalled? Where have you stopped? Many people stop at the moment of salvation, after coming to Calvary and being washed in the blood of the Lamb, they don't go on any further - they don't try to see in their lives the fruit of the Spirit manifest, and so these tests often go by without any notice. They don't even recognise them, maybe, because they're not reading the word of God. But this confidence comes when you come to the cross, when you confess your sins, when you repent of them, but when you seek by the Spirit's power to live a life before God that is pleasing to Him, and a life before men that does not unnecessarily offend them.

Now John says that this confidence will affect three things, we find them in verses 22 right to 24. Here's the first thing that it will affect: a Christian confidence will affect our approach to God. Look at verse 19, just to give us a taster of this: 'Hereby we know', John says, 'that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him'. Now that phrase 'assure our hearts before him' has been translated in another version 'This is how we set our hearts at rest in His presence'. Our hearts are at peace with God when we're in His presence, another translation puts it like this: 'Then we will be confident when we stand before the Lord'. The sense here is: here is the way we can know when we come into the very immediate presence of God that we are confident, we're at peace, we don't feel condemned, we don't feel like running away from
His presence - confidence before the very face of the Holy God of heaven! Now do you have that?

This word 'confidence' has been used already by John, and it will occur two more times in our epistle. The first and the third instance of it refer to confidence before God when the Lord Jesus comes again at the Throne of judgment - in chapter 2 and verse 28 we read about this. Look at it: 'And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming'. In chapter 4 and verse 17, the same idea of the Throne of judgment: 'Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world'. Imagine it! We, as children of God, if we live lives and walk as He walked, and are not ashamed of the testimony that we have, when Christ comes and we stand before the Bema, the Judgement Seat, we'll not be ashamed but we'll have confidence, we'll be able to lift up our head and look Him in the eye! I don't know whether any of us here, including myself, will be able to do that...

In this particular instance, John is referring to confidence in prayer, verse 19, that confidence in His presence. Then he refers to it again in chapter 5 verse 14 that we'll look at in a later week: 'And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us'. One scholar has spoken of this confidence and described it like this: 'It is the boldness with which the Son appears before the Father, and not that with which the accused appears before the judge'. There are two types of boldness there: the boldness of the accused prisoner shaking his fist in rebellion towards the judge, but John is speaking of the boldness of a son who, with confidence and adoption, comes to his father knowing that his father is towards him and he is towards his father, and there is nothing between their affection. This confidence is approaching God and being at peace in His presence, but this is what I want you to see, and this is John's point: you cannot be at peace and confident in the presence of God if you're not at peace with your brother. There it is. It would be nice if I left that bit out, but I cannot because John doesn't - in fact, that's the import of what he's saying. If you want to be a confident Christian, if you don't want to have a condemning heart, a bad conscience, if you want to develop confidence in your Christian life it will affect your approach to God - for not only will you be at peace with God, but you will be at peace with your brethren. The import is this: if you're not at peace with your brethren, you cannot have peace with God. That's serious stuff.

My friend, I have to tell you tonight that one of the reasons why our Lord Jesus died is not just to bring us to God, but to give us a good conscience. Let me show you this, turn with me to the book of Hebrews and chapter 9 first of all - Hebrews and chapter 9 verses 13 and 14: 'For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?'. The Lord Jesus shed His blood to purge our conscience. If you turn to chapter 10 verse 22 of Hebrews, you find the same thing, and it is an invitation: 'Let us draw near with a true heart', we could read it 'with a good conscience in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water'.

Now listen to what John is saying: this is why Christ died, to not only give you a pure conscience toward God, but to give you a good conscience toward your brother. In effect, what he is concluding is that you are denying one of the reasons why Jesus died if you're not right with your brother! Boy, that's serious stuff, isn't it? Jesus shed His precious blood to make us right with God, but how often do we dwell on the fact that He didn't just shed His
blood to bring us to God, but that we should come to God with our brother by our side? It was Robert Candlish who said: 'I cannot look my God in the face if I cannot look myself in the face' - that's the truth, isn't it? If you've a bad conscience, if your conscience condemns you because of something in your past, the fellowship is broken, you can't look God in the face, you find it hard praying, you find it hard studying, you just come to the meetings and maybe put the time in - but you've no real vital relationship with the Almighty! But can I add to Candlish's statement, and say that if you cannot look your brother in the eye, you can't look God in the eye!

It will affect your approach to God if you have confidence in your heart of a pure conscience with Him and a pure conscience with others, because you'll be able to come into the presence of God and know that you're there for the reason that Christ died, to bring you nigh to God's throne, but to bring you near to your brother. It will affect your approach to God, but he says secondly that it will affect your answers to prayer - verse 22: 'And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight'. John is saying that if our conscience does not condemn us, we have confidence to come to God; but we have not only confidence to come to Him, but to call upon Him and to request things of Him, and have the confidence to believe and expect that we're going to get them! Why is that? Because we're not only right with God, we're right with our brother.

It doesn't just affect a brother-to-brother relationship, or sister-to-sister, it also affects the husband and wife relationship. If we turn to 1 Peter and chapter 3, we find here the apostle speaking of the husband and wife relationship, and the duties of the one to the other, he says in verse 7: 'Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered'. We don't hear that preached on too often, because maybe we'd all get bad hearts and be condemned! Our relationships need to be right, not just in the Assembly but in the home, if we want to see our prayers answered, if we want to go to God with a confident heart, knowing that we can look into His eyes because not only can we look into the eyes of our brother, we can look into the eyes of our wives and our husbands.

I suppose the principle is Psalm 66:18: 'If we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us'. But John says in verse 22, if we keep His commandments, and if we do what He pleases - now listen to this - whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him. Now that is not a carte blanche promise that anything you ask you'll get, just the way you ask it - it must be tempered by the verse we'll come to in chapter 5 in verse 14 that says we have confidence in Him, when we ask anything according to His will He heareth us. But here's the point: if we come and approach God and there's nothing between us and God, and there's nothing between us and our brother, and us and our wives and our husbands, we'll be filled with God's presence as we come and approach Him - and therefore, when we're filled with His Spirit, we're filled with His will; and when you're filled with His will, you don't ask for anything that's
outside of His will. I want you to see how this confidence - this confidence of not having a condemning heart, a bad conscience, but having a conscience devoid of offence toward God and men - affects your Christian life, and gives you a confidence in approaching God, and gives you a confidence asking God for things and getting answers to prayer from God.

Then thirdly and finally it gives you a confidence through abiding in Christ, and Christ abiding in you. Verse 24 says: ‘And he that keepeth Christ's commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us’ - a mutual abiding. Grasp this: when your conscience is right with God because it's been washed and sprinkled by the precious blood of the Lamb, and you've confessed your sins to God and to men, and He has forgiven you, and you've come to your brother and been reconciled, to your wife or your husband and put all things right, there is an abiding - and it is this confidence of our heart that is clean and pure, a conscience that is clear, that causes Christ to abide in you and you in Him, and it is the presence of the Holy Spirit!

That is the test of Christ abiding: He will manifest His presence in fulfilling the three tests that we've seen right throughout this book and will do in the chapters that remain. The doctrinal test - look at it, verse 23: 'we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ'. If the Spirit of God dwells in us because we have a confidence toward God through our conscience that is good, we will believe that which is right about Jesus Christ, we will confess it about Him, and we will stand for Him. The doctrinal test, and then the moral test, he says 'we will keep his commandments' - you find it in verse 22, and verse 23, and verse 24. We will be obedient! How could the Spirit of God dwell in you and you not be obedient, if you've given full control? Then there's the social test: you will love one another. The Spirit of God, if He's abiding, Christ in you will manifest these fruit. For, after all, as Paul said in Romans 5 and verse 5: 'the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us'. In chapter 8 in Romans and verse 16, he says again: 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God'. Through this right view and appreciation of Christ, and through this holy life, and this love for our brethren that's shed abroad in our hearts, the Spirit is witnessing with our spirit that we are the children of God - and that ought to bring more confidence!

Can I ask you just for a brief moment, to look for evidence of the Spirit's working in your life? I think John makes it very clear that the cause of Christ's abiding, and the condition of Christ's continual abiding is obedience. Only that obedience will bring assurance to your heart. Are you a person, tonight in this place, who lacks confidence? Do you lack assurance of your salvation? Do you feel that you're a child of God after examining your heart, but you have a heart that condemns you? You're sure you're saved, and maybe you harbour a hatred to your brother or to your sister, or there's an animosity between you and your wife or your husband, and this has affected you because it's hindering your approach to God, it's hindering any answers to prayer that you could hope to get, it's hindering the abiding of the Spirit in your heart, and you abiding in Christ and manifesting His fruit. What do you do? Can I tell you this evening: the answer is the same for all of those categories, even for those who are not saved and have a condemning heart, those who are saved and have a bad conscience, and those who have a good conscience. All of us constantly need to get to Calvary! My friend, that is the only answer for us all - what is it? God is greater than our heart - hallelujah! As the hymn writer put it: 'His grace is greater than all our sin'.

My friend, whatever state your heart is in, whether it condemns you or not: all of us, I believe, daily need to come to Calvary's mount where the blood of the Lamb was shed. Maybe you need to go there alone this evening, because the condemnation in your heart is a
personal sin that you have committed against God and none other. Maybe you need to step up Calvary's hill with your brother beside you. Maybe you need to bring him with you. Maybe you need to go up to the cross with your wife, or with your husband, and say like John Newton:

'With my burden I begin,
Lord, remove this load of sin.
Let Thy blood for sinners spilt,
Set my conscience free from guilt'.

Have you come to Calvary tonight? Will you get your conscience clean with God and with men? If that is the case, you will receive a confident Christianity.

Our Father, we thank You this evening that if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knoweth all things. Lord, You know wherein we have failed You, You know everything that hangs heavy upon our hearts - but we pray that we'll not allow the devil to gain a foothold over us, and condemn us in those things for which You have forgiven us. May we have a confident Christianity, that with assurance we may come boldly through the blood-sprinkled way, to approach our God, to receive answers to our prayers, to know the abiding presence of Christ in our lives through the Holy Spirit; that we may uplift Christ and preach Him as He is, that we may obey Christ and walk as He walked, and that we may love our brothers and sisters in Christ, and so fulfil His law. Lord, may Your grace cover all our sins tonight, and may every child of God in this place be able to look into the eyes of God because they're looking into the eyes of their brethren with a clear and a pure conscience, that God may be glorified and that Christ's presence may be felt in our lives and in our church. Amen.
We're turning to 1 John chapter 4, and our title this evening as we look at the first six verses of this new chapter 4 is 'Discerning Christianity'. So, 1 John 4 verse 1: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error".

'Discerning Christianity' - what John is now telling us in this great epistle of assurance is that a true Christian ought to be able to discern between truth and error. I wonder how you figure, weighed up by that statement? Now that does not mean that you have to be an expert in the cults, or in world faiths, it doesn't even have to mean that you're well read in the great systematic theologies of Christianity, but it does mean that every true child of God should have enough of a grasp of Christian doctrine to discern between truth and error.

Now John addresses, I would cause you to note, all the members of this church. He uses this familiar phrase in verse 1, the very first word: 'Beloved' - 'agapetoi' (sp?) in the Greek - and he has used it frequently, showing his loving concern as a pastor towards these sheep. But notice that he's not addressing the overseers, or the elders, or the pastors in this little church, he's addressing all the members and he's expecting that all of them, as true believers, the true sheep hearing the Shepherd's voice - He knows them, they have followed Him - they are to be able to discriminate between truth and error.

Now there is today, sadly, an obvious absence of such discernment in the church of Jesus Christ. It would have to be said that, in microcosm, that lack of discernment is also found in the personal lives of many Christians. John understood in his own day and age that there was a similar predicament. People didn't know what was right or wrong, outside the church of course that's what we would expect, but now inside the church they couldn't tell what was truth and what was error. Specifically in the church that John is writing to, and also the other churches where this circular letter would have gone round, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was threatened by false teachers who were propounding their false doctrine. Often they would do it by claiming that they were giving inspired utterances from God, it might have been in some form of tongues they claimed, or maybe prophetic utterances by the Spirit they were claiming, but nevertheless they were claiming that they were speaking for God and that God was inspiring them to teach their error. For that reason, true believers then and now, John says, need to beware.

Now the big question is: how can we beware of something we perhaps do not recognise? It would have to be said that often false doctrine is not obvious, it is not glaring us in the face.
False prophets, by their nature, don't come along to us with a lapel badge saying 'I am a false prophet'. So John exhorts us that we should learn to discern between truth and error. So what he does is, he revisits this doctrinal test of what true Christianity is. As I taught you in previous weeks, he continually revisits his themes within this book, each time adding a little bit more truth to our understanding. We found in chapter 1 and verses 1 to 4, that was the first time we visited this doctrinal test. Then we saw it again in chapter 2 verses 18 to 27, and now is the third occasion where he teaches us that there are doctrinal distinctions of Christianity whereby we can discern what is truly Christianity in the Bible sense, and what is not of God.

So let us look at what he tells us first of all in verse 1, there he reinforces for us the need to discern: 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world'. Now there are three things here that he wants us to know: the need to discern, first of all, because not every spirit is of God. Now John had spoken in the last verse of chapter 3, verse 24, about the Holy Spirit. He tells us that every child of God ought to have the Holy Spirit abiding in him, and therefore we realise that there is a Holy Spirit - the third person of the Trinity - God the Spirit. But John is warning us that we must not think that the Holy Spirit is the only spirit that there is. Of course there's a whole realm of spirits in a spiritual world. In Hebrews 1 and verse 14 we read that there are good spirits who are called 'ministering spirits' to meet the needs of God's elect, but we also read in Ephesians 6 and verse 12 that there are deceiving spirits, 'principalities and powers, the rulers of this world in heavenly places', powers and principalities of darkness that are demonic, deceiving spirits.

So right away John is telling us that there is a need to discern, because not every spirit is of God. We ought not to be naive and gullible to believe that all who claim to speak for Almighty God are genuine and are speaking on His behalf. So right away, he's warning this church, and consequently warning us, that just because a man talks about God, or a man preaches from the Bible, or even speaks of the Lord Jesus, it does not mean that he is of God nor speaking on behalf of God. We've got to wake up to the fact that, even today, there are spiritual forces who seek to deceive God's children and those outside in the world.

Now John leads on to this point that if these deceiving, evil, demonic spirits exist, these spirits chiefly work through false teachers. Now you've no need to turn to it, because I'll be looking at an awful lot of passages this evening as we progress, but you can turn to this one if you wish initially - 1 Timothy and chapter 4, the apostle Paul tells us: 'Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron'. This is what we're talking about, these are false teachers who are proliferating their lies and heresies, false doctrines - but John wants us to realise that there are demonic devils, spirits, that are motivating these folk to teach their lies.

So we need to discern because not every spirit is of God, and then secondly he tells us that many false teachers are gone out into the world - and that's the reason why we need to discern, because these false spirits work through false teachers, and we need to be aware of this. As we go through the whole Bible from Old to New Testament, we find that it has always been this case. We read of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 13, that he warned the children of Israel right back there at the beginning: 'If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them' - do not heed him! So, Moses told the Old Testament Israelites in
Deuteronomy 13 that even if a prophet comes along, and the wonders and the predictions that he makes actually come to pass, if his motivation clearly is to turn you away from seeking the Lord, don't listen to him - indeed, Moses gives an injunction that such a prophet should be stoned to death.

Then when we turn to Deuteronomy 18 we find that Moses again gives an instruction to the people of Israel regarding false prophets. He says: 'But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him'.

So first of all he says in Deuteronomy 13, if the thing actually happens but the motivation is to turn you away from the true and the living God to false gods, don't listen to that prophet. Then in Deuteronomy 18 he says that if the thing spoken doesn't come to pass, the prophet has spoken presumptuously and you should ignore him, do not be afraid of him. Then we read from the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 8 and verse 20: 'To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to my word', God's word, 'it is because there is no light in them'. So, if a prophet speaks something that is contrary to what is already in God's revealed word, it is a sign that there's no light in them, they're not of God, they're a false prophet, and it is an evil spirit working in them. Now then when we come to the New Testament, the Lord Jesus teaches us in Matthew 7:20 that it is by their fruits that good or evil prophets shall be known: 'By their fruits ye shall know them'. In other words, if a man's life does not measure up to what he is claiming, it doesn't matter whether what he is claiming comes true, or whether he performs great and mighty works or wonders, he is not of God. Then the Lord Jesus clarifies for us again in Matthew 24 and verse 24: 'For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect'. There will arise false Christs, false prophets, they will try to deceive, they will even have the ability - some of them at least - to do great signs and miraculous wonders. Then when we come to Peter's second epistle he tells us that often their motivation will be for money, or even sexual gratification.

When we come to Acts chapter 20, if you care to turn to it, we find that Paul the apostle actually warns elders and overseers in one of the churches that there would arise from within their ranks such false teachers. Acts 20 verses 29 and 30: 'For I know this', Paul says, 'that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves'. So these are not outsiders who come in, these are insiders who go out, and by showing that they were insiders going out, they betray the fact that they were never children of God in the first place - although they professed faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now I don't know whether folk ever say this to you or not, but they say it to me: 'If Christianity is true, why are there so many versions of it?'. Often people from a Roman Catholic background ask that question, because they don't have the plethora of denominations and sects that there are in Protestantism. But you know, that in itself is a deceiving question; because the very reason why there are so many versions, it is claimed, of Christianity, is proof that attests to the fact that Christianity is, in its biblical sense, true. We have all the more reason to believe in it, because the Lord Jesus and the prophets and the apostles of old prophesied that there would be many many counterfeits, many many anti-
Christianities and antichrists, false prophets and false teachers that would arise - because the truth is true!

Some of them, as Paul would tell us later in 1 Timothy 4 and verse 3, will forbid to marry. Some will command to abstain from foods, and Satan's strategy is to contaminate the church from within, to divide and conquer. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 11 and verses 3 to 4, and verses 13 to 15, that these false teachers will preach Jesus, but they will preach a different Jesus. They will preach about the Spirit, but they will preach a different spirit. They will preach a gospel, but it will be a different gospel. Indeed, he goes as far as to say that they will appear to be angels of light, angels who minister God's light, but deep down they are emissaries of the evil one. As we've already seen, some will even perform miracles - so much so, with great signs and wonders, that if it were possible they shall deceive the very elect. Many will be convinced, especially through these great miracles, of the authenticity of these false prophets' claims, and the supposed truth of their teaching.

You've even heard it said today, haven't you? 'That man can do miracles, he must be of God'. You do feel a measure of pressure, don't you, if a man can do a miracle? If you know anybody like that you feel pressure to accept them. You don't know too many people, even preachers, who can do any miracles - but do you know what John is saying? Not every spirit is of God! There is a need to discern because there are many false teachers gone into the world, and a great number of those false teachers can do great signs and great wonders. Now there are a lot of con artists and charlatans out there, I think most of them on the TV channels are just like that - but there are those who, it would appear, can do genuine miracles...but we should not be surprised at that, neither should we take it as evidence that they are of God and we should embrace them as being such.

In the Old Testament, for instance, the magicians in Pharaoh's palace were able to counterfeit the miracles of Moses, but they were not of God. Going right to the other end of the scale, near the end of time, we read from 2 Thessalonians 2 that the Antichrist himself, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, will deceive many! Miracles, great works and signs, are not in any way a measure of authentication of whether or not a prophet is of God. Indeed, in Matthew 7, which is often quoted in many other contexts, Jesus said: 'Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied? Have we not cast out devils? Have we not done many wonderful' - the word is 'miraculous' - 'works in your name?'. Jesus says: 'I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity'. Please don't miss the import, He's actually saying that the prophesying, the casting out of devils, the wonderful works were iniquity - because God wasn't in it! There was another spirit behind it!

Now, there is a great present-day problem, because there are many false prophets around today, as there were in John's day and even Moses' day, and some of them prophesy. Many Christians are running around taking their prophecies, prophetic word, as the actual word of God. They are behaving and obeying the commands of what, supposedly, God is telling them through this prophet. There are healers running around claiming, supposedly, to have a gift to touch and to heal. There are miracle workers claiming great and mighty feats for God - and I'm telling you now: many of them, if not the majority of them, are not of God! They are creating havoc not only in churches through splits, confusion, but in individual lives where people feel that God has told them that something is going to happen and it doesn't, or it does; or God has told them that they should be healed, or the prophet has, and they haven't - and maybe some of them die. My friends, we have to be real concerning these things. It's alright living up in a spiritual world that is airy-fairy, and we just brush all these inaccuracies
and contradictions and inconsistencies under the carpet and say: 'Well, God moves in mysterious ways'. If the prophet speaks the word, people's lives are hanging on every syllable!

The fact of the matter is, what John is saying is: if there is such a thing as truth, there is also such a thing as falsehood; and if there are true prophets, true teachers of God's word around, you can be sure that there are many teachers who have gone into the world who are false. God's word says it. Just as you had Jeremiah prophesying that the children of Israel in bondage in Babylon would be exiled after seven years, you had Hananiah running around saying, 'No! Not seventy! It'll be two years!'. My friend, don't you think that this was two sides of the one coin, or just a different way of looking at the matter - Jeremiah was proclaiming God's truth, and Hananiah was lying in the name of God. There's a lot of that going on even today.

So there is a need to discern, because not every spirit is of God, many false teachers are gone into the world, and verse 1 teaches us also: 'Believe not every spirit, but try the spirits'. Now you say to me: 'But David, what if a man claims to have raised the dead?'. I know it's not easy, somebody comes along to you and tells you that they've raised the dead, what do you say to them? What if they claim to have healed the sick by their own touch? Some of them are running around claiming to have gone to heaven and come back again several times, some of them have made the claim that they've got rich quick on God and you can do the same. Well, I say to all those things: so what? So what? If a man claims this, that doesn't matter - what matters is the truth. There's nothing that says that a Christian has to be gullible and naive, and accept everything and anything that a man says. In fact, the opposite is true: there's a need to discern because not every spirit is of God, there are false teachers out there in the world, and so we shouldn't believe every spirit but try them.

I was reading today a story that Jay Adams relates, and he tells about how on one occasion in his travels he was driving through the state of Texas in the United States of America. He heard a preacher on the radio, and the preacher was inviting his listeners, I quote: 'Stay tuned to the end of this message, because if you stay tuned I'll tell you how to obtain' - wait for this - 'an autographed picture of Jesus Christ' - an autographed picture of Jesus Christ! This is over the radio in Texas. You might think, 'That's not possible!' - it's factual, this is what's going on in our world. You might say, 'Well, that's obvious!', and some false spirits are obviously false, but some are not. Indeed, the majority of them are not, and that is why the Lord Jesus warned that though we may see that so obvious, there are wolves that are in sheep's clothing, and they're there, and they're planted by Satan to devour the lambs, God's sheep. That's why we need to discern and try the spirits, to prove all things and hold fast that which is true - and it doesn't matter what a man claims, and I don't care who the man is! We're to try all the spirits!

Now, you've heard of private detectives, well there's a great need today for prophet detectives - people who will detect the false prophets. Now let me say just a word of warning before I go on any further, that we have to be careful that we don't become cynical of everything that is done in the name of Christ somewhere else - and that's a danger. We can become censorious, looking for faults in everyone else that doesn't look or sound like us. But nevertheless, the fact of the matter is: we've got to be real, this is John's warning. As we go into the book of Revelation we find that the risen and ascended and exalted Lord Jesus Christ addresses the churches there, and one of the churches He speaks to is Ephesus - and He had a lot to criticise them for, one thing was that they had left their first love - but there's one
aspect that He did commend them for. He said to them in chapter 2 verse 2: 'Thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars'.

The Lord Jesus commends us when we try the spirits and find out the false prophet. Of course, our question tonight is a practical one, and it's simply: how do we distinguish when the differences, at times, are so subtle between truth and error? So John gives us a yardstick to examine and to prove all spiritual phenomenon. Not only does he tell us that there is a need to discern, but he gives us secondly the test for truth and the test for error in verses 2 and 3. 'Hereby', verse 2, 'know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world'.

The question is: is there a litmus test, is there a check and a balance whereby we can apply some rules or principles generally to anything that raises its spiritual head, to know whether or not it is of God? Is there a, if you like, 'one size fits all' analysis by which we can try every spirit? Because, when you think about it, there's a wide range of beliefs out there from the New Age Movement, to the Masons and the Mormons, and even under the umbrella of Christendom - in the church there is a great variety of opinions. There are the liberals who deny the supernatural and the miracles. There are the ecumenists that want us all to join together even though we have grave differences fundamentally, especially the gospel of by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus. Then there are the charismatics who want to add to the Bible their new revelations. Who is right? How can we find out who is right? How do you go about establishing who is right and who is wrong? Is there a test?

Well, yes, John tells us there is. Here's the first test in verses 2 and 3, the great test of any teacher is: 'What think ye of Christ?'. What do you think of Jesus Christ? Indeed we have visited this one already in chapter 2, if you look at it, and verse 22: 'Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son'. Now Paul the apostle put this his own way in 1 Corinthians 12 and verse 3: 'Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost'. So the first test of whether you are of God or not, and whether the spirit that is motivating your prophecy and your teaching us of God, is what you are saying, what you believe about the Lord Jesus. John Newton, the hymn writer of 'Amazing Grace', put it this way in another poetic verse:

'What think you of Christ? Is the test
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of Him'.

What do you think of Jesus Christ? That is a criterion that eliminates a host of heresies. You consider the Gnostic heresy that is here in embryo in this book. 'What is that?', you say. Well, they believed that the Lord Jesus had not come in the flesh, literally, as a man; but Jesus the man was anointed by the Christ Spirit, the Spirit of God's Son there at His baptism - but the man Jesus was not literally the Christ and the Son of God. They believed that it was a sort of 'phantom' affair, He only appeared to be God's Son in the flesh, but not literally so. But right away we see that this eradicates it - if there's anyone that does not believe that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, he's not of God, John says.
The descendant of the Gnostics in our world today is the New Age Movement. They believe a very similar thing, that there is this Christ Spirit, the Baha'i Faith believes it as well, that it inhabits many religions, this 'spirit of life and truth'. Then there are the liberals, and many of them are saying in theological circles and seminaries, and even Bible colleges, that Christ was not God and neither did He claim to be God or act as God, nor was He the one mediator between God and men - there are other ways that can bring us to God. But right away this litmus test does away with the liberals: anyone who does deny that Christ came in the flesh is antichrist.

Then there are the cults, many of them deny that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily in the Lord Jesus Christ in all of His deity. The Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, they're all the same, the Oneness group, they're denying some aspect of the personality of the Godhead, either an aspect in Jesus' personality, or the Godhead's three personalities. 'Now hold on!', you might say, 'Wait a wee minute! Don't you start ruling out everybody now in all these other faiths, whether it's the Gnostics, or liberals, or the cults, or other denominations. Is there not some common ground?'. This is what people are saying today: is there not something that we can all adhere to, and say we're going to unite on this?

I would say, well, there is: we can unite with the Unitarians over the fact that there is one God, but we can't unite with them because the Bible teaches that that God is described and displayed in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can unite with the Jehovah's Witnesses that this world is coming to a swift end, but we can't unite with them in their evil teachings concerning the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, along with the Mormons denying that He is the true and only begotten Son of God. We could go on - we could unite with the Muslims over their moral code, believing that many are falling around us into sin - but is it not true that, though there is some common ground, even a clock that is broken is right twice a day? Twice a day it's right, but it's dead! What John is saying is that if you get who Christ is wrong, everything else is wrong, you're all wrong - it doesn't matter what else you believe that's right, everything else is contaminated! For to believe in the wrong Christ, to believe in one who is less than the Christ of history and the Christ of the Bible is to belong, the Bible says, to antichrist. 'Antichrist' meaning 'in place of Christ', or 'against Christ' - probably here mostly meaning 'in place of Christ'.

Do you know what John is going as far to say? To believe in the wrong Christ is to perish! To not believe in Jesus Christ, the man who was Jesus but also the Christ, who came from the Father as being the pre-existent Son taking upon Himself human flesh, like our flesh apart from sin, dying on the cross, is to deny the faith - for you deny the incarnation. By denying the incarnation you deny the atonement, for it had to be flesh and blood that died and atoned for our sin. You deny the resurrection which gives us new life, because it was not a physical resurrection if Christ did not come in the flesh. What a litmus test this is, and we could spend time which we don't have going through all the different cults and faith and beliefs and sects, and weighing them up according to this first test. If you want to do that, get our series on the cults that we did recently.

Then in verse 4, almost as an aside, John says: 'Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world'. It's a bit reminiscent of what we read from Deuteronomy 18:22, where Moses said about the false prophet: 'Thou shalt not be afraid of him'. John is saying to these believers: 'It doesn't matter what these false teachers have taught you, what they have claimed to spout from the Spirit of God when it has been from the spirit of the evil one himself - don't you be intimidated by their superior knowledge, by their charismatic powers!'. You know, there are many running around
today, they may have degrees, PhDs, and all the rest - and because of that many people listen to them - and that's dangerous - because of their superior knowledge and their intellect, people bow to them and submit to them. There are others who are claiming revelations from God, new truth, and folk can do nothing but say: 'Well, God has never shown me anything like that, and I know that this is a good man and he's such a powerful preacher I have to listen'. There are others who are claiming great experiences, and you can be intimidated if you haven't had them.

What John is saying is: don't be afraid, for you have an advantage as a Christian, 'Ye have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world'. You remember in chapter 2 and verse 20 John told them: 'Ye have an anointing from the Holy One'. These false teachers were saying: 'You haven't got what we've got! We've got the Spirit, and you haven't got Him!'. John says: 'You have an anointing of the Holy One, don't you be in an intimidated state, for greater is He that is in you, then he that is in the world'.

I think it recalls to our minds the story of Elisha and his servant. You remember his servant became so afraid of the armies of the enemies around him, and Elisha said to him: 'Fear not, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them', and God opened his eyes to see the host of the armies of the Lord round about. Can I tell you: it's easy to be intimidated by the false teachers in our world. Maybe you say: 'Well how can John in verse 4 say that we have overcome them? If we have overcome them, there's an awful lot of them about'. False teachers are still rampant in our world. Maybe you say: 'Well what he means when he talks about us overcoming them? He simply means that they have not got the true believers over to their cause. Of course they're still around us here, but John is saying whether it's persecutions from without, or perversions and heresies that arise from within, the Lord Jesus Christ's word shall stand for ever - Matthew 16:18: 'I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. That's refreshing tonight: though the walls of the church seem to be falling down all around us because of the trends of modernism and false doctrine in our midst, whatever the political opposition may be in our land or world, whatever the religious opposition even from the establishment may be, even if the media turns against us - it's a pity the BBC weren't here! - whatever they try to do, the church is still here in 2006! Isn't it?

Now that gives us a bit of a clue to the fourth point that he gives us in verse 5, and that is the origin of error: 'They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them'. You see, the world is the source of all that they teach, and therefore the world hears and listens to them. If you're one of God's sheep - though for a moment or two you might consider it, and though you might have been waylaid by it - you'll listen to your Master's voice, and you should seek the ability through who Christ is and the Holy Scriptures, as we'll see in a moment, to discern what spirit that teaching is of. But the fact of the matter is: it is the world who hears such teaching, because the world is its source.

Now there are two implications that I want to give you from the origin of the error that we find in verse 5. The first implication is: the world's approval should never determine our message - did you hear that? The world's approval should never determine our message.
Whether the world accepts what we say or not does not matter! It doesn't matter whether our Prime Minister, and our government, and the Labour Party, and maybe every political organisation now has the 'focus group' mentality to find out what the people want, and then to direct their policies according to it. It doesn't matter whether the philosophical mindset is one of relativism, that 'your truth may not necessarily be my truth, but I live and let live, and there's no absolute right or absolute wrong'. The world's approval must mean nothing to us in relation to our message. Our message is historical, our message is eternal, it is rooted and grounded in the truth of who Christ is, the Christ of history, the Christ of God.

But secondly we must therefore beware of courting popularity and acceptance with the world. Now listen: I believe in being all things to all men, and I think sometimes that we need to do a bit of bridge-building in our evangelism, of course, especially in this area - but evangelism can often be regulated by what is acceptable to people in the world, rather than what is faithful to God's word. Sometimes, more often than not, when you are faithful you face the disapproval of the world. You see, false teachers usually tell people what they want to hear. That's what you have right throughout the Old Testament: the false prophets were saying 'Peace! Peace!', where there was no peace. Whilst we don't be offensive for the sake of it, or put stumbling blocks in people's way, we need to beware that we don't see popularity as a test of our truth - it is not! The spirit of falsehood is the spirit of deceit, but we are not of darkness, we are of the truth.

Again this word 'truth' - you might say: 'Here, you're hammering this word 'truth' over and over again', but, as Pilate said, what is truth? That's the great question of the hour. The first test is Christ, what the Bible teaches about Christ is the truth - for He is, as He said, the way, the truth, and the life. He is the incarnate Word, He is the first test. What do you think of Christ? Is your Christ the Christ of the Scriptures and the Christ of history? If the first test is the incarnate Word, the second test that John gives us in verse 6 as the authentication of the truth is the written word: 'We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error'.

Now when John speaks of 'us' collectively in verse 6, he is speaking representing the apostles. What he means is this: all who are truly born of God will accept the teaching of the apostles found in the New Testament, and those who are not of God will reject and refuse the testimony of the apostles and the apostles' doctrine in the New Testament scriptures. Or if they don't reject it, they will seek to add to it, or adulterate what is already included in it. So that means this: there is no second edition of the New Testament! Do you understand? It doesn't matter whether the Mormons say that there is a new testament from the latter-day saints, it doesn't matter whether the charismatics are prophesying and it's advertised on the God Channel that this is a new revelation, and we could almost appendix it in at the back of our note-taking Bibles. It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter that somebody comes up and says: 'I've got God's word for you'. My friend, that cannot be of God - I'm not saying God doesn't move, God doesn't speak today, I firmly believe that He does in many respects - but the New Testament apostles' doctrine is the only validation of what truth is, it's the only thing we've got! Mark you, my friend, it is not what men claim, it is not what they may or may not perform, for it was the apostles who received the Holy Spirit that Jesus sent, and it was that Spirit that inspired them to write the sacred page - and so the implication is: if you reject the sacred page, add to it, adultery it, you reject the Spirit that was sent to inspire it and the Christ who sent Him!

So the second test is the written word. Do you know what troubles me a little bit today? I don't want to sound superior in saying this, but there are very few pulpits in our land, or
indeed across the Western world at least, that engage in expository, consecutive teaching of God's word. In a lot of churches that thrive on false doctrine and heresy, you'll get sermons from different parts of the scripture week after week, and they'll pluck things out of context, a lot of it out of the Old Testament - not that we despise that, of course - but they're not taking the apostles' doctrine as it is written, and understanding it in its historical and literary context, and grammatically grappling with the truths of God's word - because if they did it, they would have to throw out a whole heap of their doctrine!

That was not the practice of the New Testament church, to avoid problems like that. Indeed in Acts chapter 17 we read that those who Paul spoke to in Berea were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily whether those things were so. The question begs: where do we look to discern truth? How do we know? Where do we find spiritual enlightenment? Here's the sure thing, my friend: you don't look to those who deny our Lord Jesus Christ, either in His full deity or His full humanity, or in any aspect of His Godhead. You don't look to academic theologians who deny the miraculous and the supernatural. You don't look to the cults who deny the realities of the soul and of our Saviour. My friend, do you realise, as John preaches in his day, and as I preach in ours, that the problem is not just in the world out there, but it's here in the church - for there are those who think they know better than Christ and the Bible!

I'm being serious: they're saying salvation is for everyone, and damnation is for no one. Homosexuality is accepted, and it's not just in big issues that they're rejecting God's wisdom for their own, it's in the minor things - but it's everywhere. I was listening to Christian radio today, and it wasn't UCB, it was another radio station. They were interviewing a man who was in some city in England planting a church, and here were his opening remarks when they were talking about the church that he had planted, he said: 'We decided that we wanted to do church differently'. I was walking out the door at the time with a cup of coffee, and I nearly spilt it! I thought to myself: 'Isn't that the arrogance of modern man?' - we're going to do church differently! How about doing church God's way? How about doing everything God's way? John Wesley lamented in his day: 'If a man will not believe God, he will believe anything!'. If you don't stand for something you'll fall for everything! Do you know what we need a revival of today in the church? We need a Holy Ghost revival, but we need a revival of biblio-centric Christianity - Bible-centred faith!

I don't want to finish on a negative note - praise God that whatever the world does, whatever the devil does, or for that matter whatever the church may stoop to do - the truth will always win the day! My friend, do you believe that? I read a story today about a proud lion who was walking through the jungle, and as he was on his journey he came to a little rabbit. He went 'Grrr! Who's the king of the jungle?', and the rabbit trembled in his boots - if he was wearing them! - 'Oh you are, mighty lion! You're the king!'. The lion moved on and travelled a bit more, and he came to a monkey, and he said 'Grrr! Who's the king of the jungle?', and the monkey said, 'You, it's you, you're the king of the jungle!'. Then he came to a big old bull elephant, 16 feet tall with 6 foot long tusks, and the old bull elephant looked down at him, and the lion went 'Grrr! Who's the king of the jungle?' - and he put his big trunk down, wound it underneath his belly, lifted up his body and threw him against an oak tree that was opposite. As that lion was sliding down the oak tree like melted butter, he looked up at the bull elephant and said: 'Well, just because you don't know the answer you don't have to get uptight about it'.

Friends, listen: the devil is deceiving many that he is the strong one, but greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world. We have the truth, the truth will win the day - and we know
that when time and the world passes away, God’s word shall forever endure. An old black preacher put it like this: 'The greatest friend of truth is time'. When Joseph Smith is dead a thousand years, God’s word will still endure, Jesus Christ will still be on the throne in His glorified, holy, divine flesh. Does that not make you rejoice tonight? Oh yes, there is a need to discern, and there are tests for truth and tests for error. There is an awful origin in evil, but praise God we’ve got the truth in Christ and the truth in His word, and we have the advantage - for greater is He that is in us, that he that is in the world. May the Lord bless His word to all our hearts this evening.

Our Father, we thank You that we have one Head to our church, Jesus Christ the Lord. We have one rule of faith and doctrine, the Holy Word of God. Lord, help us, with our eyes fixed upon Christ, and our hearts and lives filled with the practical truths and doctrines of Your word, to go into the battle and to overcome, overcoming those evil spirits, false doctrines and false prophets and teachers that would deceive the elect of God and deceive those who are lost and heading to a damnation in hell. Lord, we pray that we will realise, as we go forward, that if God be for us, who can stand against us? - and that greater is He that is in us, than he that is in the world. Lord, fill us with confidence and give us discerning spirits in these awful days; but give us, Lord, within our breast just now, the encouragement to know that we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - February 2006
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Our title this evening is 'Christian Love - Its Source And Sign', and we're going to read in chapter 4 from verse 7 through to verse 21: "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also".

Now we have seen already that John has dealt with the subject, this massive subject of love - chapter 2 and verses 7 to 11, that was the first time he visited it; then the second time we find it was in chapter 3 and verses 11 to 18. Now he comes again, as he has been doing through the cycles of themes in this book, to redress again this particular issue of love. Now he does it again in greater detail, for every time he revisits a theme he adds a little bit more truth and detail to it. Someone has put it well: 'This study of 1 John has been rather like a progression through the anterooms in a great palace, each one more breathtaking as we move nearer to the throne room. Now the magnificence becomes overwhelming as the throne room doors are flung open, and we are introduced to the glorious Person who has done all this - the God who is love. Everything else in the splendour of the verses circles around one supreme reality: God is love'.

We have learnt that one of the signs of Christian fellowship, one of the ways we can take assurance as children of God that we belong to the Lord, is that the love of God is in our hearts, and outflows from our hearts to others who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. John has added to this by saying: if we do not have that love it is a sign of the opposite, that we probably are not the children of God, for this is their chief characteristic. But now he's bringing us to the point of, as this author has said, flinging open the throne room doors to let us see that the reason why we are to have love and to show love is because our God is love! Of course, we found out that this love that John describes is not a sentimental love that the world has, it is not an erotic love that our world spells 's-e-x', it is not just an emotional friendship love, it is not even a family love - but it is what is literally in the Greek, this 'agape'
love, the love of God - not us mustering it up, or trying to ape it, but actually allowing God to love others through us.

Now I have heard it said on occasion that unbelievers cannot show true love, because unbelievers cannot have 'agape' love in their hearts because they don't know God, and they're not in fellowship with God. I disagree with that statement. I believe unconverted people do love. It is true that they cannot show 'agape' love, but nevertheless even the Lord Jesus Christ Himself said in Luke's gospel chapter 6, again addressing the love that we ought to have for our enemies this time: 'For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same'. The Lord asserts that unbelievers do have love toward one another. Love is a gift from God even in the life of an unbeliever and in their family. We could call it 'a gift of common grace' that God has blessed us all with from creation when He created the family. We are to love one another, of course, and reach the standard of those around us, but we're to go further than that. The command that we have three times within our portion from verses 7 through to 21 this evening is that we are to love, 'agape' one another. We are to show this divine, actual, literal love of God, divine love to our brothers and sisters in the church. In verse 7 he says: 'Let us love one another'. Verse 11: 'Love one another'. Verse 12: 'Love one another'.

Now what we're looking at tonight are the reasons why we should love one another, if you like, the 'source' and the 'signs' of this Christian love. Here's the first reason he gives us in verses 7 and 8, and it is simply God's nature: 'Let us love one another, brethren, because of God's nature'. 'What is God's nature?', you say. He tells us: 'God is love'. Now notice he doesn't say 'God loves', of course God does love, and he does assert in verse 7 'For love is of God' - God is the origin and the source of this agape love. But that's not his chief thought here, he's actually telling us that God's nature is love - God is love. Then in verse 16 he repeats the same statement: 'God is love'. So now John is not saying that love is simply a gift from God, or love is even an attribute of God, but love in its essence - in fact, rather, God in His essence is love. It is His nature.

Now we must understand this statement of John 'God is love' alongside two other unequivocal statements that he makes. In John chapter 4 verse 24 he says: 'God is Spirit', and then in 1 John 1 and verse 5 we saw at the beginning of our studies in this book that he says 'God is light'. God in His nature is Spirit, and God is light - speaking of His holiness and His awesome unapproachable righteousness. Now I want you to notice this evening how John details the fact that God's nature is love for us. Each statement regarding love in this portion, and our need to love others, is linked to one of the persons in the Divine Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So what John is teaching us is that not only are we to love one another because love is God's nature, but that nature-love of God is displayed in the three persons of the Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are all involved in this divine love.

Verses 7 and 8 really have to do with God the Father: 'Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love'. Then in verses 9 to 11 he speaks of God the Son: 'In this was manifested the love of God', that he's just been talking about, 'toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him'. Then in verse 12 he begins to speak about the Holy Spirit, and how this love in divine nature is displayed in the third Person of the Trinity: 'No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us'. God lives in us by the Holy Spirit, and that love is displayed in our lives as a fruit of the Spirit. Again his conclusion is the same: we
ought to love one another, because God's nature is love, the Father has displayed love in sending the Son, the Son has displayed love in coming, and the Holy Spirit has displayed the same agape love in shedding God's love abroad in our hearts by His grace through faith.

In other words, God the Father is love; God the Son is love; God the Holy Spirit is love - therefore, John is saying by implication, if you know God the Father, and you know God the Son, and you know God the Holy Spirit, and you're in fellowship with them, you will love your brother in Christ. You see, he is using the very character of God, the nature of God displayed in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as a grounds for why we ought to love each other in the church. The big question that you need to answer and I need to answer this evening is: is our love for one another consistent with the nature and the character of Almighty God? He's telling us that if we are born of God, that means that we are possessors of the divine nature, and by implication we will show divine love to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So, first of all he says: Love one another because of God's nature. Then secondly he tells us to love one another because of God's grace. The verses following verse 8 contain a description of how God has manifested His love. John does this in three tenses - he talks about the past tense, that God has demonstrated His love in that He sent the gift of His only begotten Son, we find that in verses 9 through to 11. Then later on in verses 12 to 16 he talks in the present tense: God by His grace has manifested His love in the fact that the Holy Spirit dwells within us, and should be loving others through us. Then thirdly he looks into the future, and he talks about how God yet has to manifest His love toward us in the boldness that we will have in our hearts when we stand on the Judgment Day, holy and without blame before God.

Now let's deal with each of these that show us that we ought to love one another because of God's grace. Let's look at the past, verses 9 to 11. What John is telling us is that as sinners we are dead and we need life, as sinners we are guilty and we need pardon. So God sent, John says, His only begotten Son into the world so that we could be saved, that we could have life - live, verse 9 says, through Him. So that's the answer to death: we can live through the only begotten Son that God has sent - and He is, John says, the propitiation for our sins, verse 11. That's the answer to our guilt as sinners: He takes our guilt and sin away.

Now let's analyse this verse so we understand how God truly has manifested His love toward us in that past sense. We need to analyse what this word 'only begotten' means, it's only two words in our English language, but it's even fewer - it's one - in Greek. What does it mean 'only begotten'? Well, it carries the unique relationship which the Son had with the Father, and it's a relationship that no other son can share with the Father. Let me explain that: within the word of God angels are designated as 'sons of God'. Adam, when he was created, has also been classified as 'a son of God'. All the saints, Old and New Testament, but particularly the New as we see even in this book - chapter 3 and verse 1, speaking of the love which the Father has bestowed upon us 'that we should be called the sons of God' - we're all sons and daughters of God. But this phrase is exclusive, because there is only one 'only begotten' Son of God. Let me say that the NIV says 'one and only Son', some other translations translate it like that - although that captures some of the sense, it is not strictly correct because really Jesus Christ is not God's 'one and only Son', but He is His 'one and only begotten Son'.

Now it's interesting that this same word is used of Isaac in Hebrews chapter 11, if you want to turn with me to it, it will explain a little better what this word means. Hebrews 11 and verse 17, we read: 'By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son'. Now at this particular time in Abraham's life, you can read the account in Genesis 22, he already had a son, Ishmael, by
Hagar. Later on, after this event, he had other sons - but Isaac is called by the writer to the Hebrews 'Abraham's only begotten son'. Now how can that be? Simply because Isaac was unique: he was unique in his birth, it was miraculous; he was unique in his relationship to Abraham as his father, none of the other sons had the promises that Isaac had. So what we're saying is that though Abraham had other sons, he had only one 'only begotten' son. Now when we look at the angels, and we look at Adam, we see that these are the sons of God by creation. When we look at ourselves as the saints in the New Testament era, we are sons and daughters of God through redemption and by adoption. But Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, begotten not created - and there is a difference!

You see, Jesus is not just a man like the false teachers were saying in Ephesus, who was born naturally into the world at Bethlehem - and, all of a sudden, because He honoured God, during His baptism in the Jordan the Holy Spirit came down upon Him, the 'Christ Spirit', and all of a sudden He became something akin to a 'Son of God' - no! It doesn't mean that Christ was begotten to humanity in Bethlehem, but as we see from verse 14 of chapter 4 it's categorically stated that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. This is the pre-existent Christ, the Father sent His Son, that means His Son existed before Bethlehem. Sons are not sent into this world, sons are born into this world - but the Son of God was sent by God out of His pre-existence as His only begotten Son. That literally means 'of the same divine substance as the Father' - it is the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of our Lord Jesus.

This is John's point: once we find out what 'only begotten Son of God' means, it brings us to a point where we realise how remarkable this fact is - that God should send His only begotten Son into the world to save sinners like us! The astounding nature of this love is further evidenced in the fact that we, upon whom this divine love was lavished, did not love God. In verse 10 it says: 'Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins', verse 19 says, 'We love him, because he first loved us'. God's motivation for sending His Son to die for us was not in response to our love, it was in response to nothing - absolutely nothing! Indeed, to the contrary, it was a response in spite of our hatred and our rebellion and our antagonism in the face of the holy God of heaven - and that is what grace is! Amazing grace!

Our incredulity is heightened when we discover how this love was displayed and demonstrated to us as sinners. Look at what he says in verse 10 at the end that He, the Son of God, became: 'the propitiation for our sins' - He died for our sins. Now we'll look in a moment at what this word 'propitiation' means, but let's grasp this: here is God, who sends not just a son in the person of an angel, or a very special human being, He sends His only begotten Son of the same nature as He, God the eternal Son. He doesn't send Him to those who showed love towards Him, or had any merit in them, but the opposite indeed: those who broke His law, defiled His name. He sends Him to die as a sacrifice for those rebellious sinners' sins. Romans 5 helps us to grasp in measure the magnitude of this great truth. In verse 6 of Romans 5 Paul writes: 'For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth', or demonstrated, 'his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'. But friends, He didn't just die for us, He became the propitiation for our sins - 'What does that mean?', you say.

Well, we looked at that word already in chapter 2 and verse 2: 'He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole world'. Now let me say again that most modern translations, the NIV, the RSV, and others obscure the meaning of this word 'propitiation'. It is the Greek word 'hilasmos', and most modern translations have chosen
to translate this word as 'the removal of guilt', or 'the removal of punishment' - the result of our sins. Some use the word 'expiation', which is just a theological word for 'the cancellation of our guilt' - that is not the full extent of the idea of 'hilasmos', 'propitiation'. Its meaning is more than 'removing guilt' or 'punishment', or 'cancelling our sin', it literally means 'turning away the wrath of God from us because of our sin, by an offering that has been made on our behalf'. It's not just the cancelling out of our debt, it's the turning away of God's anger. This word is used in Hebrews 9 and verse 5, but it's translated there as 'mercy seat', and that is exactly what 'propitiation' means. We have to illustrate it by Old Testament Tabernacle truth.

In the Tabernacle there was the holiest place of all, the Holy of Holies. The Ark of the Covenant dwelt therein, and on the top of the Ark there was a highly ornamental lid that was crowned with two cherubim, which are angelic beings, of solid gold. These two cherubim on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant were facing each other, looking down upon the lid of this box. The whole lid of the Ark was called 'The Mercy Seat', and it was there that the nation of Israel met God in Person through the High Priest. So once a year, and only once a year, the High Priest came in bringing the blood of the sacrifice, and he would sprinkle it upon the Mercy Seat - and it was only in that way that Israel could meet their God. Now listen to that: they couldn't come in just any way, like Cain, and offer an offering that they had devised; they must come by the blood sprinkled way, for the blood makes atonement for the soul, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission for sin. So in the great Day of Atonement the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies, He sprinkled the blood on the Mercy Seat, the nation was accepted by God, and for another year they could come in and worship the Lord.

Now here is the antitype of that truth: Christ, Hebrews says, is our Mercy Seat. John says He is our propitiation - why? Because He is the sacrifice, He was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification. We, Hebrews says, can come boldly now unto the throne of God, the Mercy Seat, because of Christ. It is now a throne of grace because of His sacrifice.

How did Christ demonstrate His love for us? By taking the wrath of God upon Himself that was against our sin, and by doing such He brings us to God. Now that is what propitiation is, it's not just an atoning sacrifice, it's not just a cancellation of our guilt - God can't just put sin beneath the carpet and ignore it, turn a blind eye - sin must be dealt with judicially. Here in propitiation we have this means whereby God's wrath is exhausted in a just fashion, so that He can turn His wrath away from us because He has put His wrath upon His own Son.

I'm labouring the point because there's a great attack upon this doctrine today. There is an attempt to de-personalise the wrath of God. People say: 'Well, God's punishment is just an inevitable disastrous result of our sin, but it's not as if God really wants to do it'. The thought is almost that God is not just in punishing sinners, people think it's unbecoming of a God of love to be angry against a sinner - it doesn't seem to weigh up with God's love, to also be at the same time angry with sin and those who commit it. Yet the fact of the matter is, friends, whatever your particular view is - the wrath of God is mentioned 585 times in the Old Testament. Five hundred and eighty five, granted it's not mentioned as many times in the New because it's mostly about grace, still in Romans 1 and verse 18 God's word declares that: 'The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men'. Indeed, what Paul is doing there is beginning a legal argument about salvation, and he's showing at the very introduction of his argument that there is wrath from God towards sinners that needs to be propitiated. There's a need for God's wrath to be removed, but the problem comes because many cannot square God's wrath with His love.
I don't know whether you've heard of Steve Chalke, I've mentioned him before. He's a popular Christian TV personality, he's also a Baptist minister and founding director of an organisation called 'The Oasis Trust'. To his denials of the truth of creation, and his denial of the truth of the fallen human nature, he has now added to those two heresies a denial of the doctrine of propitiation. In his recent book entitled 'The Lost Message of Jesus', published by Grand Rapids and Zondervan in 2003, which he co-authored with Alan Mann, he has caused outrage in the evangelical community by saying that this doctrine of propitiation is not only error, but it is abhorrent! He recently was to open the Christian Resources Exhibition that comes to the King's Hall once a year here in Belfast, he was to open it in the Midlands - I believe he did on the 8th of this month, just last week, and he was to be one of the seminar speakers. A number of Christian organisations, one in particular, were appalled at this. Steve Chalke asks the question in his book, page 182, listen: 'How have we come to believe that at the cross the God of love suddenly decides to vent His anger and His wrath on His own Son?'. He considers this to be a mockery of Jesus' teaching, and a contradiction of the statement that 'God is love'. He says that that view of the cross would make the atonement, I quote: 'a form of cosmic child abuse - a vengeful Father, punishing His Son for an offence He has not even committed'. Furthermore he claims that, I quote again: 'both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of the events [of the cross] morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith'.

'Morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith'? That's very strange, because my mind went straight away to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:18, that: 'the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God'. That may or may not explain why Steve Chalke has ceased to preach 'penal substitution' - that is, that the cross is Christ standing in my place, taking my shame, bearing the wrath of God for me so that I would not have to, and as it says in Isaiah 53: 'the God of heaven laying upon Him the iniquity of us all'. As far as he is concerned the cross is simply identification, God is identifying with the pain of humanity, those who feel forsaken, those who are suffering - and may I say that though we may not subscribe to such an error as Steve Chalke, the fact of the matter is: by our silence many are passively forgetting to speak of the cross, and of the precious blood, and of substitution.

Steve Chalke's heresy is the fact that his book doesn't mention the message of Jesus at all - but for our benefit, he fails to see that the context of John's use of this word 'propitiation' is talking about the love of God that He has for sinners. Do you see it? John's theme has not been God's anger, it has been His love, and he introduces propitiation in that light. He's talked about the love that God has through the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead; and what he's saying is that that same love that was willing to send the Son, and the love of the Son that was willing to die for sinners, and the love of the Spirit that was willing to illuminate them, emancipate them, and live the life of God within them - it's the same love that put the wrath of God on His own Son, but literally His own anger on Himself that we might go free! That's real love!

James Denney, in his book 'The Death of Christ' - which I believe Martyn Lloyd Jones said was one of the most instrumental books in his understanding of Calvary - he says these words, and this is profound: 'Note the resounding paradox of this verse, that God is at once loving and wrathful, and His love provides the propitiation which averts His wrath from us. So far from finding any kind of contrast between love and propitiation, the apostle can convey no idea of love to anyone except by pointing to the propitiation'. Can I explain that for you? He's saying that Paul couldn't describe the love of God without using the word 'propitiation', because that's what it's all about! On the cross Jesus took my pain, my punishment - that is
the great backdrop to the love of God that makes it so great! The greatness of it was described by the hymn writer in his stanza when he said:

'Stronger his love than death or hell;
Its riches are unsearchable;
The first-born sons of light
Desire in vain its depths to see,
They cannot reach the mystery,
The length, and breadth, and height'.

This is the greatness of it - John's building up our minds to realise the extent - this remarkable love is the fact that He sent His only begotten Son; it's the fact that in sending His Son, He sent Him to die for sinners that were not predisposed toward God, whose thoughts were not in any way with God, but who were against God. He sent Him to die, but not just did He die as a martyr, or as an example, but He died as our propitiation, taking our sin. That's wonderful, isn't it? But please don't miss John's point - his punch line is verse 11: 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another'. 'Since' could be the word 'if', there's no doubt about it: 'Since God so loved us, we ought also to love one another' - and whilst there may be no doubt about the love of God for us, his question is: is there any doubt about our love for our brothers?

Let us love one another because of God's nature, God's love. Let us love one another because of God's grace in the past, but then he says thirdly: let us love one another because God is invisible, God is invisible. He tells us no man has seen God at any time, verse 12 - and no man sees God today. Indeed, none of us can see God incarnate in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ today, and that is how, after all, in the past God manifested His love. That's what the apostle said at the beginning: 'We have seen and do testify, we touched Him, we heard Him, we handled the Word of life' - but we don't see Him! So the big question John is posing to us is: how is this love of God demonstrated to us today? Oh yes, it was demonstrated in Christ when He came in the flesh, went to the cross, died for our sins, rose again - but we can't see Him. I believe that these verses are among some of the most challenging texts in the whole of the word of God. What John is saying to us is: 'No man has seen God at any time', verse 12, 'If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us'. As God was manifested to men in the past in the incarnation of Christ, God will be manifested to mankind in the present not in Christ, but in the Christian.

So, when the world looks on us, what do they see? Do they see Christ? Do they see God? John is implying that just as Christ dying on the cross 2000 years ago before men, and rising again before men, was the answer to mankind's needs; the answer to mankind's needs is that same love, agape love that is to be displayed through the lives of Christians - Christ's-ones! We are meant to be the answer to mankind's needs, not in and of ourselves, but because the love of God is meant to be displayed in our lives. Do you know what my initial reaction to this truth was - after picking my jaw up off the ground? I felt a tendency to laugh sarcastically - I'm sorry about that, but that's the way I felt, because that's not what the world sees! The world is meant to see His love perfected in us, but they only see us biting and devouring one another, they see bickering and they hear on the radio Christians leathering into one another over secondary doctrines which are important to the people of God, but mean nothing to a soul that is lost and on its way to hell. What do they see?

What did they see in the life of the apostle Paul? If you turn with me for a moment to Colossians chapter 1 - this is a difficult verse of Scripture that perplexes many, because at
first it seems to demean the atonement of the Lord Jesus. Verse 24 in chapter 1 of Colossians, Paul describes how he as a minister of Christ now rejoices in his sufferings for the Colossians: '...and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church'. He’s describing how he was suffering for these Christians in Colossae, and he was describing how the reason of the suffering was for the furtherment of the gospel, and the blessing of Christ among the body of Christ - but this is actually how he refers to the sufferings of the Lord Jesus, he says that he is filling up with his sufferings what is behind, the word literally means 'lacking', in the sufferings of Christ. What would you say to someone who said that the sufferings of Christ were lacking? You'd probably call them a heretic, wouldn't you? Paul is not meaning that there's something deficient in the sufferings of the Lord Jesus, far from it. What he means is that the world that then was, when Christ was literally on the cross, literally bleeding and dying, they were able to witness that agape love - but people today can't see Him! People today can't witness it! That is a measure of what is lacking in Christ's death - it needs to be conveyed today! How is it conveyed? Paul says: 'I'm conveying it by my sufferings, the love of Christ in my life when I'm suffering for the lost, to build up the church of Christ when I'm suffering for God's people, I am demonstrating presently the agape love of Christ'.

How much of that is seen today in the church, and in the lives of individual Christians? I could give you many instances of stories of missionaries who suffered and died for the Lord Jesus, and from their blood that was shed the church of Jesus Christ sprang up in multitude from their sacrifice. Not all of us will ever be missionaries, but I heard a moving story which is so practical about a Salvation Army worker who found a derelict woman squatting alone in the street. She invited her to come in for help to the little Salvation Army Chapel. The woman refused, the worker asked her again, and she said: 'We love you and we want to help you. God loves you and Jesus died for you', and the woman didn't budge an inch - she just stayed where she was. It was as if that Salvation Army woman had a divine impulse, and she ran upon her and she kissed her and threw her arms around her and hugged her. That drunken woman began to sob, and through her weeping she was heard to say like a little child: 'You told me that God loved me, but it wasn't until you showed me that God loved me that I wanted to be saved'.

Now friends, that is what is lacking in the preaching of the cross today - the practical agape love of the dying Jesus. That is not possible of ourselves, it is the agape love of God - and verse 13 shows us, if we look at it, that this happens only by the Spirit of God: 'Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit'. Don't you think you can just go out and throw your arms around drunks and kiss them - it doesn't work like that! It has to be God's love within your heart, only God's love will do - but what we're saying here is that the first way that love is demonstrated presently, as it was in the past at Christ's death, is through Christlike lives of Christians who are Spirit-filled, filled with the agape love of Jesus, that's how it is demonstrated presently! It doesn't matter what you say with your mouth, what are you doing with your life?

Then John tells us the second way that this love is demonstrated presently in verse 14, it's in the apostolic message of the cross. 'We', the apostolic 'we' again, 'have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world'. We must show practical love as Christians, and it's a great thing, and it's a great lack in the church today - but if you really want to love someone, you need to give them the Gospel, you need to preach to them the cross. Dr Francis Schaeffer said that 'Such love', speaking of Calvary, 'is the ultimate apologetic' - it is the greatest argument for people to believe in God and have their souls
Presently the love of God is demonstrated through the apostolic message of the cross - what is that? Well, he tells us in verse 15: 'Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God'. You confess the truth about Christ, and it brings new birth, it brings the indwelling Spirit - and what is that? This is an epistle about assurance, how can I know that I'm a child of God? How can I know I'm in fellowship with the Lord? The first test, what was it? Doctrinal: if you believe in the historical, biblical Jesus, the Son of God come in flesh - believe in Him, that's the doctrinal test. Then he tells us secondly at the beginning of verse 16 what this apostolic message is: 'We have known and believed the love that God hath to us'. We have known it and believed it, we will come to appreciate the love of Christ for us, and through appreciation of His love for us we will come to love others. Verse 19: 'We love him', or it could be 'We love, because he first loved us'. In the second half of verse 16: 'God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him' - that is the social test. It's alright believing all the right things about the Son of God, but have you experienced His love so that it's flowing out of your life to other believers and to the lost of humanity?

If you're in fellowship with God you must love those who He loves. The doctrinal test is the apostolic message, who Christ is. The social test, loving our brothers; and then thirdly he speaks of the future manifestation of this love of God, which is the reason why we should love one another. It's found in verses 17 and 18: 'Herein is our love made perfect', it could be, 'Herein is His love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love'.

This love brings peace into our hearts, peace straight from God - so that you're serving God not with a fear of being judged or punished in the future, but that you're serving God out of love! We love Him, because He first loved us - I'm not serving God to keep out of hell, His propitiation has kept me out of hell, I'm serving Him because I love Him! That is the moral test, that my righteousness will be displayed not out of the fear of the law, but out of my love for Jesus because He loved me so. Count Zinzendorf talked about this future judgment, that because of the love of Christ - His precious shedding of blood, the imputation of His righteousness toward him as a sinner by grace through faith - he wrote these words in his great hymn 'Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness':

'Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame'

John put it like this: 'Because as He is, so are we in this world' - what does that mean? Where is Christ now? Hallelujah, He's at the right hand of God, a Prince and a Saviour! He's not suffering any more, all the judgment and the wrath of God has been exhausted upon Him. 'It is finished!', He cried, it's complete - God was satisfied, raising Him the third day - and as He is beyond judgment and condemnation for our sins, so are we in this world! So that Paul could say in Romans 8 and verse 1: 'There is now no more condemnation' - hallelujah! - 'to them which are in Christ Jesus'. Christ's judgment is behind Him, and so is it for us. Mrs J. A. Trench put it like this:
'Death and judgment are behind us, 
Grace and glory are before; 
All the billows rolled o'er Jesus, 
There they spent their utmost power'.

The theme that we've been looking at tonight is the social test of love. You might believe the right doctrine, you might even behave morally - but listen to what John says as we conclude tonight, verse 20: 'If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?'. In the early days of radio in Britain George Bernard Shaw was giving a talk about the peculiarities of the English language. In the course of his discourse, he mentioned that there are only two words in English which begin with the sound 'Sha', they're not spelt 'Sh-', but the sound that comes out is 'Sha' - two words. One listener wrote in to say that this seemed untrue, there was only one such word in the English language and that was 'sugar'. She received a postcard with a reply after a few days on which there was just one sentence: 'Madam, are you sure?'. John is asking us tonight: are you sure? If you hate your brother, you're a liar. 'And this commandment', verse 21, 'have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also'.

The source of divine love is God, who is love. The sign of divine love is the Christ of the cross, and the love of the Christ of the cross in the Christian. May it be manifest in our lives, and in the life of our churches.

Our Father, we thank You for loving us enough to send Your only begotten Son. We thank You, Lord Jesus, that You loved us enough to come and to die, and to be the propitiation for our sins. Lord, let us never lose the wonder of that love, but O we pray, dear God, that through the Holy Spirit the fruit of that agape love would overflow from our hearts to those around us in Christ, and those around us lost and in their sins. Hear our prayer, we pray, Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - March 2006
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So let's turn together then to 1 John chapter 5, and we're almost - I suppose - at the end of our studies, that's conjecture really how many more weeks we have in it - but nevertheless, we'll seek to get as much as we can out of these remaining verses. We're looking at the first six verses of chapter 5 this evening under the title: 'The Features Of Effectual Faith', and this is our fourteenth study in this little book.

Chapter 5 and verse 1: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth".

Now if you have been following this study with us every Monday evening over the last while, you will have noted that right throughout this little book of five chapters are three interwoven threads. They are the tests, the proofs, the evidence of spiritual eternal life. To put it another way, they are the tests of how we can have assurance that we indeed are the children of God, or as John often puts it 'are born of God'. So this is a little epistle chiefly related to the issue of fellowship, how we can know we're in fellowship with God - i.e. how we know that we are born of God, the children of God, and how we can have assurance of that fact. Of course the three tests, those three threads are: 1) the doctrinal test; 2) the social test; and 3) the moral test. The doctrinal test being that we believe what the Scriptures teach, and what history records regarding our Lord Jesus Christ. The social test being that we love our brethren, and that others even in the world look upon us in the church and see the love that we have one toward the other, and see a witness of the very agape love of God in God's temple today, the church. Then the moral test, which simply is obedience - that we obey God's commandments, and we're walking in His precepts and principles.

Now what John does for us is, as he's effectually coming to the conclusion of this little book, is he blends these three thread themes together - truth, love and righteousness. In order to conclude this great message on assurance, just in case we didn't get the point already, he wants us to realise that these are the three tests, the three proofs of whether or not we are born of God. Now that being the case, however, he introduces a new term to us right at the very last chapter of the book which he has not used previously in this epistle, or indeed anywhere in his Gospel narrative - at least he never uses the noun until now. He uses the verb form in the Gospel and in this epistle, that is the verb 'believe', but here we find he uses the noun 'pistis' in Greek, which is the word 'faith'. 'Who is he', verse 5, 'that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?'; and verse 1, 'Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God'; verse 4, 'this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith' - and there is the noun.
Now, although this is a new introduction for us tonight, this thought is inextricably linked with all that has gone before - but now what he's doing for us is, he is reinforcing the true nature of Christian faith. This is the Christian faith, he's saying to us, and here are the evidences of that particular life in the believer. So what John's doing for us now is, he's using this term 'faith' inclusively and exclusively - what do I mean? Well, simply: he is wanting us to be sure of those who are in the faith, inclusive, and those who are outside the faith - remembering that there were those who were doubting in this assembly, just as there may be those in this assembly that we're speaking to tonight, and indeed right across our world, whether or not they are in the faith. So he wants us to be sure of how we can know the sheep that are in the fold, as opposed to the sheep that are still lost and outside the fold, and those who are trying to climb up some other way into the fold.

So he's bringing to us the truth of what the Christian faith is, what it is to be saved, and of course what it is to be lost; what it is to know that you have eternal life, and what it is to doubt and effectively not have it because of that doubt. Here is the evidence, he says to us, that you can know that you have effectually believed in the Lord Jesus Christ - again the three same: the doctrinal, the moral and the social tests. Now let me say that this introduction of this word 'pistis', 'faith', is very instructive for us in our post-modern and post-Christian era, because much thinking today in our world, and sadly to say also in the church, has been intoxicated by a philosophy which is called 'relativism'. You may have heard that expression but perhaps not understood what it means. Donald T. Kaufman in his dictionary of religious terms defines relativism thus, I quote: 'It is the point of view that since anything must be described in terms of something else and measured accordingly, everything is relative'. Let me repeat that: 'the point of view that since anything must be described in terms of something else and measured accordingly, everything is relative, and reality must be considered', he goes on to say, 'in subjective terms. In the religious field this may produce moral nihilism', which means no morality at all, 'and spiritual confusion. Whereas the Christian', in contradistinction, 'acknowledges temporal relativity', that there is relativity in the things of time, 'but trusts in an eternal God who is the source of absolute standards and values'.

Now maybe that has confused you! Let me illustrate it to you like this: the Christian ought, at least, to say today that homosexuality is wrong - why? Because God has established the absolute standard that sexual union is to be celebrated in the marriage bond between one man and one woman, and any other sexual activity outside of that, including homosexuality and various other heterosexual acts, is prohibited - God has given us an absolute standard. But the world says: 'No, no, no, that's not the case at all. Values are not absolute, values are related to other factors in life - and those factors can change, and therefore our values are subsequent to change also' - that is, for instance, society's opinion has shifted seismically regarding this issue of homosexuality, and therefore they conclude in a relativistic way that because it's acceptable to the majority of people in our land, therefore it must be alright. That is relativistic morality: 'It must be alright because it has become acceptable'.

Now that idea of relativism has manifest itself in the church, chiefly I would say in the ecumenical pragmatism that we see operating all around us. What is ecumenism? Well, it is a uniting together - which isn't a bad thing in and of itself - but unbiblical ecumenism ignores fundamental differences that there are in doctrine and belief, and they fellowship on common ground. So it doesn't matter that you differ with another fundamentally on certain intrinsic issues, as long as you have certain common ground you should be able to fellowship on it. Now there is, I believe, a biblical ecumenism which unites on fundamental doctrine, even
though it is in spite of some minor divergence of opinion. Let me illustrate this to you: on Saturday past I received an invitation to announce to the church here the Women's World Day of Prayer. I didn't know anything about it, all I knew was that it was taking place in our vicinity in East Belfast Methodist Mission, and it was said to be in the literature 'A day when 'Christian' women over all the world united to pray' - and it's happening this Friday, the 3rd of March. Now that sounds great, and we should always encourage one another, Christians everywhere, to pray - and you know that I would be behind that. Then I read the literature a little bit further and found out that 'all Christian traditions were taking part' - that's not necessarily a bad thing, until you read that included within those traditions was the Roman Catholic tradition and the Orthodox tradition in its various spectrum of expression. Indeed, apparently, it was given in definition that the reason why it's being held on this Friday the 3rd of March was to accommodate those in the Orthodox Church. Now you say: 'What is the problem with that?' - well, added to it is the fact that many apostate Protestant churches, I'm sure, were getting involved in it; so it's not a sectarian view just chiefly towards Roman Catholicism and the like. But these churches, they deny the fundamental doctrine of the justification by faith alone of the believer - that is, that we are saved by grace through faith, not of ourselves, it's the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast, Ephesians 2:8-9. They deny the very means whereby we come to God, so how can we come together to God on different grounds?

So we have to therefore ask the question: what is this faith that we ought to be united in? Well, it certainly is not the relativism of our society or of ecumenical pragmatism. Sadly this relativistic philosophy and practice has contaminated much thought and faith in the church to the extent that what you believe doesn't matter, as much as how you believe what you believe, how sincere you are, how compassionate you are in holding and sharing your faith. Some would accuse me of being unloving and being uncompromising in what I have just expressed, saying that those who don't believe in justification by faith cannot be classed as Christians - that's terribly intolerant, especially in our modern age! But the fact of the matter is, if anyone levels an unloving and uncompassionate trait to me on that ground, it is to the contrary - because John actually teaches us that he marries, and the Holy Spirit has married truth and the exclusivity of that truth with agape love, the two go together.

John is not the only one who does this, Paul does it frequently. In Ephesians 1 verse 15 Paul says: 'Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers' - faith and love. He does the same in Colossians 1:3-4: 'We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints'. First Thessalonians 1 verse 3 the same: 'Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father'. Paul is not on his own, along with John, but Peter joins in as well in 1 Peter 1:8: 'Whom having not seen', that is faith, 'ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory'. It is wrong to say that if you have a doctrinal belief that is fundamental and uncompromising, that in some way it is uncompromising - the contrary is the truth. The exclusivity of truth can only abide with agape love, God's love will not abide with error.

Now John's stress is laid on the object of our faith rather than, as our society and the church at large stresses, the subjective experience of believing - how you believe: sincerely or compassionately. No, John wants us to see that the fundamental issue is the object of our faith, what we believe in, who we believe in. The body of belief, John is telling us, is not an optional extra somewhere down the pecking order after some esoteric experience that we
have: ’I've known God, I've had this experience, that experience - it doesn't really matter the intricate details of who I believe in’. John says 'No! It means everything! It means your salvation!'.

So what is this faith that we ought to believe in, the features of effectual faith. Well here's the first thing he shares with us in both verse 1 and verse 5: a true Christian believes that Jesus Christ is born of God and is the Son of God. Verse 1, a true Christian believes that Jesus Christ is born of God; and verse 5, a true Christian believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. So John is again reminding us, if we needed it, that authentic Christian faith is based on something that is fixed, something that is constant, the evidence of the testimony of the life and the work and the words of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not some intellectual exercise practised by the highly intelligent, it is not some kind of emotional experience that is limited to the charismatically initiated and the privileged few. It's not an abstract idea or philosophy, it is not a theological or a theoretical concept in and of itself - John is telling us: it is in historical fact! This faith is the belief that Jesus is begotten of God, and is the Son of God. It is irreducible in its content. It has not, cannot, and ought never to be changed - that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Now, listen to me: that is not an article of faith, that is our faith, start and finish! Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Now, throughout his first epistle John has been expounding what this means, to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He tells us first of all in chapter 1 and verses 1-3 that to believe in Christ is to believe in His Deity: 'The Word of God] was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us'. So you've got to believe that this Christ was divine. You see, the heretics that were sowing the seeds of their false doctrine in the church of Ephesus and others, the forerunners of the Gnostics, were teaching that the man Jesus was different than the Christ Spirit that came upon Him - a bit like the cults today and false religions. But you've got to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and He is the Son of God; Jesus the man, the Son of God as well.

To believe in the Christ is to believe in the power of His death to cleanse from all sin, chapter 1 verse 7: 'the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanseth us from all sin'. Do you believe that, that His atonement is enough? The Unitarians do not believe that, the liberal Protestants do not believe it, the Roman Catholics do not believe it - you must believe it! It is that blood alone that will avert the righteous wrath and anger of God, chapter 2 and verse 2, that alone will be the propitiation for our sins, that alone will appease God as a worthy and righteous sacrifice for our sins. You've got to believe that God has expressed His love, not just His anger but His love, on the cross and through the death of our Lord Jesus in His atonement - chapter 4 and verses 9 and 10: 'In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins'. Is the cross, literally, the crux of your faith? For if it is not, it is not the Christian faith.

You've got to believe in Christ by believing that this eternal life is experienced only by faith in Him, and that faith is a product of the grace of God. We'll see it in subsequent weeks, verses 11 and 12 of chapter 5: 'And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life'. It is faith, by grace saved through faith. Now my friend, maybe you think that this statement is a bit naked, that our faith is to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Some might say: 'You could drive a horse and cart through that statement' - no, you can't! Jesus, the man, is the Christ - but He is begotten of God as the only Son of God, coequal to
the Father as the Son in the triune Godhead - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, yet one essence. That is the God that is revealed in the Scriptures, that is the Saviour that was sent to this world - and if you reject Him in any of those attributes, you've rejected the faith.

Plummer, the commentator, put it well when he said: 'It is to believe that Jesus is the Christ. It is to believe that the One who was known as a man fulfilled a known and divine commission; that He was born and was crucified, is the Anointed, the Messiah of Israel, the Saviour of the world - to believe this is to accept both the Old and the New Testaments, it is to believe that Jesus is what He claimed to be: one who is equal with the Father, and as such demands of every believer the absolute surrender of self to Him'. A true Christian exhibits the faith - here's the doctrinal test - in the belief that Jesus Christ is the only begotten of God and Son of God.

Then secondly this faith is manifest in verse 1 and verse 4, because a true Christian is born-again: 'Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God', verse 4, 'For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world'. Now the tenses are very important, and they don't come out in the English language - so just bear with me. If you look at verse 1, it says: 'Whosoever believeth', or 'He who believes', that is the present tense, 'has been born of God', that is the perfect past tense. So let me define it like this: 'He who is presently believing in Christ, in the way that we have defined in verses 1 and 5, has been in the past born of God, and it is effected in our present'. So, something that happened in the past in your life, your new birth, has effected your belief in Jesus today as the only begotten Son of God. Do you see it?

One commentator put it like this: 'Our present continuing activity of believing is the result, and therefore the evidence, of our past experience of new birth by which we became and remain the children of God'. In other words, God took the initiative in our salvation and in the new birth. You see, faith is a gift of God, and it's not only God's gift to us as Ephesians 2:8-9 says, but it is, as John has pointed out, the first active sign that there is life in us - faith! But that faith presently in us is a sign of the new birth that happened in our past. Do you realise this? I feel, and I know that I'm on somewhat controversial ground, that at times the controversy of the matter robs us of the beauty and the wonder of this particular doctrine.

It's outlined for us in Ephesians 2 if you turn with me to it, showing how God took the initiative in our salvation. First of all in verses 1 to 3 Paul outlines how we as human beings are unable to save ourselves: 'And you...who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation', or way of life, 'in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God', God is the prime mover, 'who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ', just in case we miss the point, '(by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus'. Then in verse 8: 'For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God'.

Now we must say categorically on the authority of God's word, this passage and right throughout the whole New Testament and Old, that salvation is a work of God. From start to finish it is of God! Even in our individual salvation, we must come to terms with the fact that personally God instigated the first move in our individual experience. Now let me say that we do not believe, as I've repeated often the Scottish theologian who said: 'in any form of God's
sovereignty that nullifies man's responsibility', and therein is a great mystery that I have never solved nor will - but yet we cannot deny the reality of what John is telling us, and what Paul tells us in Ephesians. That is that God instigates the new birth in our life that brings within us that faith that Jesus is the begotten Son of God.

Now you might say: 'Well, why do you have to emphasise that point this evening?'. It is somewhat controversial to believe that we must be quickened in order to believe in who Christ is and what He has done, and so on and so forth - but it has great ramifications on our contemporary society, and how we apply these Scriptures and how we apply the Gospel. What do I mean? Well, we're living in a godless culture, just as Paul and John did in their day. In a godless culture there's a great tendency that we stoop to all sorts of levels to communicate the Gospel to those around us who are lost. What this truth teaches us is that it is the new birth that brings spiritual life to men and women, we are not relying on our own human ability to bring people to the Saviour. We preach the word, and we do it faithfully, and we do it reasonably and rationally and passionately - but it is not for us alone to convince and to convert men and women. The danger is, in this day when the Gospel is lambasted and totally rejected, that the acceptability of our message to the masses becomes something that is so important that we divest it of this supernatural element, wherein it is a work of God! It's not just a decision of man! In our age we need to realise that our sufficiency is of God in this issue of salvation and in the issue of the ministry of the Gospel.

If that is a negative point to make: that we don't in any way pander to the lack of acceptability that our message may have to a post-modern, post-Christian age, there is a positive aspect to it. It's simply this: that if salvation is of God, God can still do it today the way He ever has done it! Now we need to beware, of course, for many have gone into an exclusive camp and corner whereby they've used this doctrine of the sovereignty of God in salvation as a pillow to lie their head upon, and they've gone to sleep evangelistically, and somehow believe that we don't need to preach the Gospel - when the fact of the matter is that we use the instrument of the Gospel that God has ordained to bring to Him those that should be saved. This is the truth that I want you to grasp: whatever the winds of change might be that are blowing in our society, the wind blows where He wills, and we hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence he or where he goes - so is everyone that is born of the Spirit. That ought to give us courage to preach the Gospel, knowing that it is the work of God, and God can still work it today.

Secondly, and this is the emphasis that I want to bring you more heavily tonight, this fact that God is the one who brings the new birth to bear upon men and women ought to implore us to implore God to do it over again and again and again! Do we call, and cry, and agonise, and groan, and weep, and mourn that God may move in new birth in the lives of our loved ones, our friends, our neighbours, our colleagues and our land? Do we wait upon God? You preachers, I don't care whether you're Calvinistic or Arminian, that is irrelevant to what I'm saying: do we wait upon God for the divine power that is necessary for preaching God's word? This is the work of God! I rebuke my own heart - just as God brought light into the world by a word, He brings new life through the word of His power. That is why we preach the word, it is the instrument of salvation - Romans 10:17: 'Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God'; 1 Peter 1:23 'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever'. There is an executive, regenerative authority in the very word of God, but it must come effectually to men's hearts. Like Jesus, the Son of God, stood that day and shouted into the tomb that was stinking of Lazarus' flesh: 'Lazarus, come forth!' - could a dead man hear? He was made to hear by the power of God that was in the voice of the incarnate Son of God.
Now don't you start pigeonholing me - you can do it if you want - and asking me at the door: 'Are you this, that and the other?', because I'm not going to tell you, you should be awake enough to know. The fact of the matter is, this is what I want you to hear friends: salvation is of God, and if it's of God that means that it's not all about us - it's about God, and it's about us imploring God to move in His Spirit in the lives of individuals! Do we do that? Jesus said in John 5:25: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live'. People say to me: 'You're contradicting yourself', or 'that doctrine contradicts another one' - well, did Jesus contradict Himself here? 'The hour is coming now when the dead shall hear' - how can the dead hear? The dead hear, as Charles Wesley says, 'When He speaks, and listening to His voice, the dead new life receive'.

That's what we need today: a true Christian is born-again - are you born-again? I'm not asking you did you put your hand up in some meeting, or did you pray a prayer or sign a card - I don't know what it was, but I'm asking you: are you born from above? Is the life of God in your soul? A true Christian believes that Jesus is begotten of God and the Son of God; a true Christian is born-again - these are the features of effectual faith. Then thirdly, a true Christian loves the Father and His family. Verses 1-2: 'and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments'. A true Christian loves his Father. Another translation puts it like this: 'Everyone who loves the Father, loves His child as well'. You see, the Spirit-given faith that comes from God in the new birth has life with that, and that life will manifest the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul said in Galatians 5:6: 'For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love'. The faith of God that saves is always saving faith alone; but that saving faith is never alone, it has fruit with it - and one of the fruit is love. Now you know when a baby is born it doesn't take place in isolation, and no baby is unique and unrelated in its characteristics from it family. It's born from a family, it's born into a family, and it has relatives and it will show features of those relatives - good as well as bad. What John is saying to us is this: if the life of God is in you, you will love your Father and you will love His family. A love without faith, as we've already said, is not the faith of the Gospel. To say 'Just love everybody, and deny the truths of the word of God' - that's not love, and it's not the Gospel; but equally so, faith without love is not the faith of the Gospel either. Faith without love is not a feature of effectual faith. Faith that does not lead to love is meaningless, and love that is not based on faith is powerless. The Scriptures testify, and I stand to be corrected, that when there is unity in truth - the next two letters of John, 2 and 3, are all about that - when you get the fundamental doctrines of the faith correct, and you unite together with brothers and sisters in the fellowship, God has a tendency to bless such a unity - that's when revival comes.

You mightn't like what you're hearing - it has never stopped me in the past. The fact of the matter is: when revival comes, denominational differences often pale into insignificance. You can sit there, and you can say: 'I believe in the brotherhood, I believe that we're all brothers and sisters in Christ'. You might go further and say: 'I believe that there shouldn't be denominations, and it should just be the church of God here and there and everywhere' - but I'm asking you, in the light of what John has said, is it only your certain type of Christian that you love? I mean, the one that's like you, a particular type and mould that you're in? It could be denominational: Presbyterian, Reformed, the Church of Ireland, Methodist, Baptist, Brethren, Independent - you name it, we could go on and on - and it's them. Maybe you don't
hate everybody else, but you just love them a wee bit more. It could be class distinction, upper-class and you look down on those who are the working class. You could be a working class with trade union blood, and you look down on those who are above you. All sorts of divides - doctrinal divides - whilst we cherish doctrine and never ought to dilute it. You could be a Calvinist or an Arminian, and that matters to you so much - or a pre-millennialist, and you won't have a-millenialists or post-millenialists about you, when they're the children of God!

You see, what John is trying to get us to realise is that membership in God's family isn't limited to anything other than a confession that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God. Therefore, if membership to the family is on that grounds and that grounds alone, fellowship in the family should be on that grounds and that grounds alone. Now that's God's word - you can add whatever doctrines and little rules and regulations on top of that you like, but that's God's word. I'm not saying these other things aren't important, of course they are - but they should never limit our brotherly love, that's what John is saying! It's ironic to me that often those who shout the loudest about the deficiencies of denominationalism and certain denominations, are often the most exclusive in their sectarianism!

A true Christian loves the Father and His family. Then fourthly and finally, a true Christian not only believes that Jesus Christ is born of God and is the Son of God, a true Christian is not only born-again, a true Christian not only loves the Father and His family, but verse 3 tells us that a true Christian is obedient to God's commands. Verse 3: 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous', or burdensome. Now right away we realise that there are two different world views here in our world. There is the view of the unregenerate, and there's the view of the child of God. It would be obvious, and we'd be surprised otherwise, if the unregenerate didn't see God's commandments as grievous or burdensome. Sometimes you hear them talk about that: 'Oh, you Christians, all you talk about is do's and don'ts and rules and regulations. Why would I want to be a Christian?'. They perceive themselves to be free, to be at liberty, doing what they want even in the face of a holy God. They see God's commandments as restrictive, they are burdensome, they're an irritation, positively irksome - 'Why would I ever want to be a Christian?'.

But I wonder do we, at times, think that way about God's commands? Now, be honest - secretly sometimes, to pray, to read the word, to study, to get to the Breaking of Bread, to love your neighbour, to not yield to temptation, and so on and so forth; it's not always easy, it can be a very big burden. So what is this meaning, because God's word clearly says that God's commandments are not burdensome and not grievous. Well, I think there's a twofold meaning here. You remember the Lord Jesus was speaking in the Gospels to the backdrop and context of Pharisaism. He said in Matthew 11: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden', burdened, 'and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' - contrasting it to the Pharisaic approach of adding 600 or so rules and regulations to the grace of God. In Matthew 23 He gives us an insight: 'They bind heavy burdens', Jesus said of the Pharisees, 'and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers'.

So what God's word is saying through John is that God commands are not like that, they're not burdensome like legalistic Pharisaism. If you've got legalistic Pharisaism, you haven't got the faith of God! If your Christianity exists of just rules and regulations, and do's and don'ts, what somebody looks like, how they measure up to your standards, that's not Christianity!
I'm not saying there aren't rules, I'm not saying there aren't principles, I'm not saying there aren't standards - but if that's all you have, you haven't got the faith!

Secondly, I think what John is getting at is also the sense that when we love the Lord, His commands are not burdensome. Like the Lord Himself said: 'I delight to do Thy will, O God'. You might retort: 'Well, then why, at times, are they grievous and burdensome?' - because we don't love the Lord the way we ought. Oh, it is our chief complaint that our love is weak and faint. We need to love Him more, we need to get nearer to Him. He said in John 14:15: 'If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments'. One has said: 'The commandments of God become burdensome only when we desire to do something else. In that case, love for our own will dominates our love for God, and fellowship is broken, and what is intended for our good seems cruel and restrictive. The solution is to return to that position in which we love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds'.

Where's your love tonight? Could that be a reflection on your lack of obedience? Do you remember when you were first in love with your wife? You'd need to have long memories, some of you! You used to open the car door and guide her into the passenger seat and everything, but now - as the saying goes - if you open the car door, it's either a new car or a new wife! The fact of the matter is: when love grows cold, obedience grows cold. Do you remember Jacob labouring for Rachel? Laban said: 'Labour seven years, serve me for seven years', and Genesis 29:20 says that those seven years seemed unto him but a few days, for the love that he had to her. That's what our obedience is meant to be, that God's commands are not grievous, are not burdensome - of course, there's times they will be, but it's all because our faith has grown weak and our love has grown cold.

When a mother takes a baby into her arms, and you tell her to look after that child, you're only telling that mother what she loves to do anyway. She loves the child, she's going to look after the child. Like the wee girl carrying her baby brother, and somebody said to her: 'Is he not a bit heavy for you dear?', and she says: 'He ain't heavy, he's my brother' - you know the saying! She loved him, so to carry that burden was not grievous, it was not irksome, it was not uncomfortable, it was not inconvenient. It was as burdensome as wings are to a bird! For eventually those burdens take off, and take you higher to glory near the Saviour!

A true Christian is obedient to God's commands - now all these are interconnected: faith, love, holiness. I want you to see this: it's like the spokes of a wheel, they're all worth nothing on their own. If one of them breaks, the other two are useless. My friend you need to see this: you could have all the doctrine and be able to expound it and pontificate and prove it, but if you don't have love, if you don't have holiness, it means nothing! Man, it could mean you're not even converted! That's the seriousness of this portion. Or maybe it's love that you have, but you don't have this doctrinal belief in the fundamental Gospel by grace through faith - you're not saved! Or maybe you've got the love, you've got the faith, but you haven't got the morality - your life is filled with sin and iniquity, an habitual lifestyle that John condemns, that proves that if you're habitually living in such a trend you're not a child of God. Now that's God's word: you've got to have the three! You say: 'That's a high price you're asking' - that's salvation, my friend! If it's a gift of God, it's not for the asking, it's been purchased through the cross at Calvary, it's yours if you'll believe it and embrace it. Do you have it?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to have a pastoral fraternal in London. The story goes that on one occasion a very accomplished speaker came to address those ministers and pastors, and he expounded the reformed doctrines of faith - Calvinism effectively. It transpired that months
later, after his very good exposition, he was exposed as having been living in sin at the time that he gave the address. This was a great scandal, and the next time the fraternal met there was a man who quizzed Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this very issue, and asked him how it could be justified and so on and so forth, and how this man could have such a grasp of certain doctrines - whether you agree with them or not is immaterial - and yet he was living presently in habitual, continual sin. This is what the great doctor said, and it would be worth adhering to for all of us, he said: 'Give me a holy Arminian any day, over an unholy Calvinist'. Give me a holy Arminian any day, over an unholy Calvinist. Which are you? It doesn't matter to me whether you're an Arminian or a Calvinist, are you holy? You can have the doctrine, you can even have the love, but have you got the life?

I left one out - fifthly: a true Christian will overcome the world by faith. Verse 4: 'For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith'. You hear a lot about victorious Christian living today, but you see very little of it. Many Christians, if they were honest, are living defeated lives. They're asking the question: 'Is it possible to overcome the world?'. This phrase 'overcometh the world', 'overcometh' is in the Aorist tense - 'has overcome', literally. It indicates a victory which has been achieved, in the past, once for all, the effects of which we are still living with today. What is it talking about? Calvary! Is it possible to overcome the world? Yes! It has been overcome! He has nailed it to His cross - and your flesh, and the devil!

Now I know you're maybe not living in the victory of it, but your faith - the true effectual faith of God - rests foursquare on the fact that Jesus has defeated death, and anybody who can defeat death can defeat anything! You can't fight the world and overcome it, it doesn't come through organisations, it doesn't come through government, it doesn't come through politics, it doesn't come even through Reformation. He that overcomes the world must overcome it by faith. Faith gives the victory - why? Because it joins us to Christ, who has won the victory of the cross over the world, the flesh, and the devil. We become united with Him by faith, and therein overcome the world.

Are you defeated tonight? You need to ask yourself: are you a Christian? That's the first thing you need to do. I'm not going to tell you that if you called upon the name of the Lord you're saved, when you're living like a reprobate - that's not the Gospel. 'Many will say unto me, 'Lord, Lord', but they have not done the will of my Father in heaven'. Maybe you are believer and you just haven't got to the stage of appropriating what is yours in Christ: it's by faith, it's not by working it up, or stirring it up, or waiting, or doing this that and the other - it's by faith embracing it. Not just saying what God says is true, but acting on what God says because it is true!

The story is told of an American Civil War veteran who used to wander from place to place. He was a tramp and he would beg, and he hadn't even a bed to lie in at night. He rummaged in the rubbish for his eats. No matter where his travels took him, he always talked about a friend, Mr Abraham Lincoln - nobody ever believed him, of course, that he knew the great President. Because of his serious injuries during the war he was unable to hold down a job, and for as long as he could he kept going around and he would chat, as he begged and stole, about Abraham Lincoln. One day one man said to him: 'You say you know Mr Lincoln. I'm not sure that you did know him, I want you to prove it to me. Now come on!'. So the wee tramp put his hand in his pocket, and said: 'I can prove it, in fact I have a piece of paper here with Mr Lincoln's signature on it himself, and he gave it to me himself'. Out of his pocket the tattered wallet came, and a folded piece of paper. He unfolded it and showed this inquisitive man, and the tramp said: 'Now, I'm not good at reading, but I know that's Mr Lincoln's
signature'. The man, with his chin hitting his boots, said: 'Do you know what is here? Mr Lincoln has personally authorised, with his signature, a pension for the rest of your life - a federal pension authorised by the President himself'. He looked into that tramp's eyes, and he said: 'Why on earth are you living like a tramp in the streets, when Mr Lincoln has made you rich?'.

I don't know whether people around us in the world doubt our claims - could it be because we have never appropriated the riches that are ours in Christ? Friends, these are the birthmarks of authentic Christianity. These are the features of effectual faith; and what I want all of you to do here tonight, whoever you are, is to look into the mirror of God's word and ask: do you recognise yourself as one that is born of God?

Father, we know that in another place John could say: 'I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, 'Now is come salvation and strength, and the Kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ; for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night, and they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto death'. Lord, we thank You that we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. Those of us who are saved and sure, may we continue to be more assured through these attributes and features of effectual faith in our lives. But Lord, those that are not sure, may they make sure, making their calling and election sure, being sure that they are in the faith - for nothing is more important. Their soul depends on it. O Lord, hear our prayer, and thank You for the Lord Jesus who gives us the victory over the world, in whose all victorious name we pray, Amen.
Chapter 5, and we're beginning to read at verse 6, and the title I've taken for this evening's message is 'The Case For Christ'. Chapter 5 verse 6: "This is he", speaking of Jesus the Son of God, that he has spoken of in verse 5, "This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life".

The Greek word for 'testify' or 'bear witness' is used no fewer than ten times in the portion of Scripture that we have read this evening from verses 6 to 11. I see it that John is depicting for us in a type of illustration, a courtroom drama. Now, as you may be aware if you're familiar with the New Testament, Paul uses courtroom imagery in the book of Romans. Of course, specifically in some of those portions of Scripture, he presents God as our Judge; God, who is holy and righteous, weighing our sins against His law. Not only is God the Judge in Paul's courtroom scene, but we are the accused, we are condemned before the holy law of God. Then in his scene also we find that there's a third party, and that is Christ who is our Advocate. He is the One who stands before the throne of God, and pleads our cause and proves that, in fact, we are not guilty as God's law declares, but there is evidence to prove that our guilt has been exonerated. As we sang:

"Five bleeding wounds He bears,  
Received on Calvary;  
They pour effectual prayers,  
They strongly plead for me;  
'Forgive him, O forgive', they cry,  
'Nor let that ransomed sinner die!'"

'Before the throne our Surety stands, our name is written on His hands'. Often when we talk about a courtroom drama, it is Paul's picture that is conjured up in our minds which chiefly concerns our salvation. What I want to suggest to you tonight is that John paints a different courtroom scene for us that effectively is the opposite of Paul's. What do I mean? Well, let me suggest to you this evening that in this scene, Christ is in the dock. Christ is being accused! Now bear with me: God is the Advocate, God is the lawyer, the barrister presenting a case on the behalf of Christ. 'Who is the judge?', you might say, 'If God is the Advocate and Christ is the accused?'. Well, you are the judge and I am the judge. Now, hearing that, you might say: 'Well, surely either you or John cannot be right?'.
Well, the key to understanding and interpreting that illustration is understanding what the issue is about, what John and Paul are respectively illustrating. Paul is illustrating salvation, but John is not illustrating salvation, John is illustrating the case for Christ. Jesus is in the dock, He is accused - who is He accused by? By those who are telling us falsely so, that He is a mere man, that He in His flesh is not the Son of God. Now, of course, John wants us to see Him being convicted for being God’s Son - but He's in the dock. 'Who will convict Him?', you might say - well, it is God Himself. God, in this portion of Scripture, is presenting the evidence for Christ as being the Son of God. We are the ones to judge, we are to weigh the evidence that God presents to us and ultimately conclude beyond reasonable doubt that He is indeed who He said He was. Now, John has already been talking in verses 1-5 about our faith, what our Christian faith is. Now he’s wanting us to consider whether or not our faith is resting upon solid ground. Our faith rests on the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God - we saw that last week - but is that claim authentic? So he brings us into the courtroom, Christ is in the dock, God is presenting the evidence, we are to judge the case - the case for Christ.

So let the case for Christ begin: the first scene that John conveys to us is God presenting three witnesses for the accused, three witnesses on the behalf of Christ. So the first thing I want you to notice in verses 6-8 are the witnesses giving testimony. First of all let me say, and I think it's important that I do so, that we're confronted right away with a textual problem. Are there three witnesses that are presented on the behalf of Christ to prove that He is the Son of God, or are there six? If you were to read verses 7 and 8, you'll count that in heaven the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost bear witness; and then in verse 8, the Spirit, the water and the blood bear witness - in total there must be six. Now if you have a modern translation of the Bible, or at least you've read them, you may well know that most modern translations omit verse 7 from the text. Those that, perhaps, don't completely omit them, include them in a footnote below and cast some doubt upon the authenticity of that particular text.

Now let me say right away that I would agree with many that some modern translations are unreliable, and doubt has been cast on many of the omissions that are found in the footnotes of those translations. But I have to say to you tonight that most evangelical conservative Bible scholars agree that verse 7 of this text is a later addition to the word of God. Now you're sitting here, and I realise that some very devout believers in the Scriptures are starting to get worried - and you're saying: 'Do you mean that part of my Bible is unreliable?'. Let me say categorically: no, I mean far from that! But if we're to understand the issues like this that are presenting themselves to us in this day of a plethora of modern translations, we need to understand that the Bible we hold in our hands tonight is a translation, it is an English translation. Now I am not a textual scholar, neither a Greek scholar, but many people do not appreciate how we got our English Bible. This adds to a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding when we talk on subjects like this this evening. You must remember that the English Bible you have in your hand is a translation into English from the Hebrew Old Testament text and the Greek New Testament text. What many Christians fail to appreciate is that the original manuscripts that were written by the hands of the prophets and the apostles are lost, they are not existent, we do not have them today in any museum, you cannot find them and get even photographs of them in your local Christian bookshop or any library in our world.

But this is what adds not to our doubt concerning God's word, but our faith in the fact that God has preserved His word. Because, though the original manuscripts are no longer extant, there are many many handwritten copies passed down through the centuries, multiplied over and over again and again, so that God could multiply the Scriptures right throughout the
world. I have to say to you that there's very little difference between most of them. Now you will appreciate that through years of multiple duplication before the printing press - this was done by the hand of scribes - that that multiple duplication could expose those copies to human error. The original scriptures were divinely inspired of God, but just like making a copy of a text by your own hand, error can be introduced - whether that human error is through addition, adding something that wasn't originally there, or subtraction, taking something away. It is quite possible for something to be, perhaps, by a scribe, jotted in a margin just for consideration, and all of a sudden the next scribe that came along to make a copy several centuries later included that scribal insertion in the actual textual document.

The Authorised Version of the Bible is taken from a manuscript probably written and compiled around the 12th century AD. Now since that - and the scholars then were using the best manuscripts that they had - since then thousands of manuscripts have come to light from as far back as the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century AD, and none of those manuscripts have verse 7 - none of them. Now you might say: 'Well then, where did it come from?'. Well, it's likely that it came from a fifth century old Latin version of the Bible, and it was incorporated into the Latin Vulgate in AD 800, and Erasmus was forced under pressure from the Pope to add verse 7 to his Third Edition of the New Testament in 1522. Why am I telling you that? Well, Luther took Erasmus' Greek manuscript and translated the Bible into German from it. Tyndale took it and translated the Bible into English, and it was by this route that it came into the Textus Receptus and therefore the first edition of the Authorised Version in 1611. By the way, you don't have the 1611 version in your hand, it's the fourth version you have, but the first version was 1611. None of the early Greek manuscripts, none of them, save a number of manuscripts that seem to have been doctored later on around the 15th century or so to placate those that believed this verse should be in - chiefly the Pope - none of them record this verse.

Also, historically speaking, none of the church fathers who, remember, were in battles concerning the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ against the Arians - none of them used this verse as a proof text to prove the Trinity that they were arguing for, and it would have been an ideal one to use if it was in the text - but they didn't have the verse. Now let me say categorically that we are not doubting what the verse says, the verse is true and the doctrine that it is espousing, the Trinity is true. There are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and these three are One. Then you might say: 'Well, why make an issue of it? Why are you bringing this up at all?'. Well, the first reason I'm bringing it up is that the cults know about this verse. They know it is spurious, and they use it to disprove the Trinity. They say, because that verse shouldn't be there, that means the Trinity is erroneous - what would you say to that? Well I'm giving you what to say to it! Also I'm bringing it up because you might be shaken in your faith in the Trinitarian doctrine of the Godhead by thinking this verse is not there, when in fact you don't need this verse to prove the Trinity - it is right throughout the whole of the New Testament, and indeed in many places in the Old. But you may retort: 'David, you're making people doubt the authority of the word of God!' - on the contrary, on the contrary, because textual accuracy is the goal of translation: to bring us to the full and complete word of God. Let me say that if we are concerned about versions that take away from scripture, and we are; surely we should be concerned about additions to scripture - and here is one. Guy King, the commentator, said: 'This triumvirate of almost complete silence of old manuscripts, versions and writers convince us that the verse must be excluded'. You can look at all the commentators, even your Scofield Bible, all the reference Bibles, all of them say the same thing - conservative evangelical scholars and we need to be transparent and man enough to admit it. Now if that rocks your
boat, I'm sorry, and you need to have a conversation with somebody who knows what they're talking about. But you need to realise that what our faith is in is not in a translation, it is in the Scriptures.

But there are three witnesses to the authenticity of Christ whom our faith is built on. Those three witnesses John gives us as: the water, the blood, and the Spirit. Now again there are various interpretations of what the water and the blood are - these first two witnesses. For instance, Augustine and others say that John 19, where John says that he witnessed the blood and the water flowing from the side of Christ, that that's what he is alluding to here - the death of our Lord Jesus, and how that proves that not only He was man in dying, but He is our Saviour through a sacrificial death. Then Luther came along and said that the water represents baptism, and the blood represents the Lord's Supper - that is problematic because the Lord's Supper is not blood, and if it's representative of the wine, well, that's only half of the Lord's Supper; there is the bread as well which represents the body. That doesn't seem to be what it means at all. Then there are others who look to the Levitical system in the Old Testament, and see that water was the cleansing agent there and blood was the atoning agent. While there may be a measure of truth in that, it doesn't bear any relation to the context that John gives us here in this portion.

Others say the water represents the word of God, and yes in scripture it often does - but I don't believe that's the real interpretation of it. I think the answer to what the water and the blood are in this portion of Scripture are found in the text first of all, and then also in the context of the text. Let's look at the text first of all: 'He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood'. Now the preposition 'by' in this verse, in the middle of verse 6, not the first one but that in the middle, is vital to our understanding of what the water and the blood are. Literally it could be read like this: 'In', or 'by means of', or 'through' - read it again: 'He came by means of, in water, through water, through blood, in, by means of blood'. 'How so?', you say. Well, I believe that the interpretation of this verse is that the water refers to the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, the baptism that was feted as the beginning of His public ministry here on earth. The blood, of course, refers to His death, the fact that He was incarnate and because of it He could go to Calvary, and He did go, and He bled and died on our behalf and in our place for sin.

So that's the text, it literally means that, read it again: 'This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but through water, in water, by means of water and blood'. That's the text, what does the context say? Well, you remember that the heresy that John is writing against in this epistle in particular is that of false teachers personified in a man called Cerenthus, and later on the Docetists and the Gnostics. What were they saying? They were saying that Jesus was not born as the Son of God, He was not originally from His birth the Christ, but at His baptism in the river Jordan the Christ-spirit that had been on many other men, even in other religions, came upon Jesus and He became the Christ. Then of course they believe that before He went to Calvary that Christ-spirit ascended from off Him, and the man that died there on the cross was just a man, He was not the Son of God.

So the text is pointing to us that at His baptism, it was the same man at the baptism as it was at His death. He came by means of the water and of the blood. What John is hammering home now is: No, Jesus Christ did not come by water only, but by blood. Jesus Christ, the man Jesus was the Christ before and at His baptism, but the Man that died was the Christ of God, the Son of God. In other words, he's telling us the Jesus Christ that was born in Bethlehem was the Jesus Christ that was baptised at Jordan, and the same Jesus Christ died at Golgotha and shed His precious blood for us as an atonement for our souls. In Acts 1 verse
11 the Lord Jesus said that He was going, but He would come again, and it was pronounced to the disciples: 'This same Jesus shall come again in like manner as ye have seen Him go'.

Now these are two of the witnesses that Jesus - this is the point - Jesus is the Christ. The Man that was born in Bethlehem of the virgin Mary was born as the begotten of God from all eternity, the eternal Son of God by water and the blood. In other words, if I could put it to you like this: as Christians, our faith takes hold of a complete Jesus, a complete Jesus. What am I talking about? He did not come by water only, this was not some experience that a man called Jesus had, good that He was, at His baptism - and that was just a spirit, and it has come upon Mohammed and other men, the Baha'u'llah and others in other religions throughout all the years. No, no! This is unique, this Man, He is the Son of God come in flesh - not only come by water, but come by blood and dying in blood!

Now if water and blood are external witnesses, and they are, God presents and calls forth an internal witness, and that internal witness is the Spirit - the water, the blood, the Spirit, we're told in verse 6, bear witness. Now the principal role, you will know, if you're familiar with the New Testament, of the Holy Spirit is to testify of things concerning Jesus Christ. In John chapter 15:26, Jesus said: 'But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me'. In John 16:13: 'Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come'.

His witness, the Spirit's witness, along with the water and of the blood, can be completely and utterly relied upon - why? John tells us in verse 6 at the end, because He is the Spirit of truth. Now keeping with the courtroom drama, in other words what John is telling us is: the Holy Spirit, as God as Advocate calls Him into the witness box in this case for Christ, He doesn't need to take an oath. He doesn't need to say: 'I swear by Almighty God that I will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth', because He is the truth! He is bearing witness because He is God the Holy Spirit. He is truth personified, He is the only truth - not a truth, but absolute truth!

This is important: there are three witnesses called forth. The first two are external, the water and the blood; the third is internal, and it is equally as important - because without the internal testimony of the Spirit of God, we could not be saved. Do you hear that? It is not enough for Christ to die, it is not enough for Him to be raised from the dead: if we are to believe these things, and our blind eyes to be opened, and our hardened hearts to be broken and made anew, we need to have the work of the Spirit in our hearts. I mean it's obvious, isn't it: one person hears the external witnesses of the water and the blood, they hear that this is indeed Christ, He is the Son of God and He has died for sins, yet they turn their back on Him and reject the Gospel. They don't have that internal witness of the Spirit of God, they're not convinced and moved and convicted. But then there's another, and he hears that this is the Christ that was baptised, this is the Son of God that died for his sins and rose again, and he has the witness within his heart, and he realises that Christ is who He said He was, and what He has done, and he knows no peace until he rests his all upon Christ by faith.

Do you have that witness in your heart? Do you have that testimony? This epistle is all about the assurance, and so we are asking the question of ourselves: do we have not only the witness of the water and of the blood, knowing who Christ was from His birth, His baptism and even in His death, and what He died for - but do you have the witness of God's Spirit in your heart? Does He bear to you and in you the witness that Christ is the Son of God, He is
your sin-bearer, He took your sins, sorrows, iniquities, transgressions as His own and carried them away? That's what Wesley meant when he said: 'His Spirit answers to the blood, And tells me I am born of God'. Does He tell you that?

Well, praise God, as God calls these three witnesses to the witness box, the record is given that these three agree - that's what he says: 'These three are one', at the end of verse 8. They are united in the testimony, these witnesses on earth, concerning the perfection of the person and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ - they're in agreement! So that leads us on from the witnesses giving testimony to the weight of their testimony. It is in that fact of their agreement, first of all - verses 9-10. It's hard to get three men to agree on anything anywhere - especially in Christian circles! But when these three witnesses are assembled together in the court, it's amazing: they are found to be completely in agreement! 'They are one', could be translated in the Greek: 'They're in complete harmony, they're all united'.

Now in any court of law in any land of our world, three witnesses all agreeing would provide the strongest evidence of the truth; beyond any doubt the case would be carried. But we have to look at the word of God, and in Jewish law we see from the book of Deuteronomy 17 and 19 that it was necessary to have either two or three witnesses for a case to be carried. Our Lord Jesus recognised that principle, if you care to turn with me to John chapter 5 to show you this, John chapter 5 beginning to read at verse 31, the Lord Jesus conceded in verse 31: 'If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true. There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true. Ye sent unto John', the Baptist, 'and he bare witness unto the truth' - there is the first witness that Christ is pleading for Himself, John the Baptist. 'But I receive not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved. He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light. But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me'.

This is staggering, for when we go to Hebrews chapter 6, you don't need to turn to just now if you don't wish to, but even God, God Almighty, confirmed His promise recorded in Hebrews 6 with an oath by two unchangeable things, calling them to witness that what He has said is true. Here we have God calling three witnesses, all agreeing that Jesus is the Son of God, just as John the Baptist testified at His baptism when he said in John 1: 'And I saw and bear record that this is the Son of God'. The Roman Centurion, though he was not at the water, the baptism, he was at the blood - and what did he say? 'Truly, this man must be the Son of God'.

This is what John presents to us, for in verse 9, if you go back to 1 John, he says: 'If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son'. You see, oftentimes we have no qualms or questions in accepting the witness of other men. You might say: 'Oh, no, no, I test everything' - do you? When was the last time you were on a plane, and you went into the cockpit and said: 'Now, boyo, give me your flight certificates for passing your exams, I want to know that you can fly this plane'?
You don't ask him, you just get in, you trust that he is qualified and he's not on the drink. Then there's the doctor, you walk in and, whilst they make mistakes just like the pilots, you put a measure of trust in them. You don't question their word at times, even when you should. But this is what John is saying: we often do not question other men, but many are found questioning God!

Indeed, in our own shallow society much of the public fall hook, line and sinker for anything - particularly that the media tells us. If they read it in The Sun, The Star, or the Daily Mail - maybe it's pushing it to say The News Of The World - but if they read it in the media, they seem to believe it. When you see some of the different polls that are taken from time to time, they tell us that the influence of a personality or a politician or a public person is often determined by what the media say about them. If the media turn against you, you're in trouble, you're finished! You could call it the 'new media gospel' - it's accepted as truth! Many people believe anything they hear or anything they read, but here's the point: whilst they often do not question men, some of the most irreputable at that, they question what God has said in His witness of His Son.

Yet, which is greater, John says. God is greater! For He has given three indisputable pieces of evidence, and then we see that we have also the Father's testimony. He has testified of His Son, and we know that He did that - for if we go to this first piece of evidence, the water, we read in Matthew 3 that at His baptism: 'Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove', there's the Spirit, 'and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. At the water He testified of Him: 'This is My Son'. At the Transfiguration in Matthew chapter 17 He does the same, His voice is heard: 'While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him'.

The water, the Transfiguration in between, and then the blood that we have been speaking about. In John 12, 'Now', He says just before Calvary, 'is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him'. It is the Father's testimony that Jesus is His Son. My friend, you can believe what the BBC newscaster tells you tonight at 10 o'clock, oh believe it if you will, but believe God's testimony of His Son! For if anything is sure: it is that.

In verse 10 John says: 'He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son'. You see this isn't some laissez-faire attitude that you just say: 'Well, I'm not sure about this whole subject. I maybe accept He's a good man and all that, and maybe even a prophet or philosopher like the Islamists say. Oh, He's a good man, but He's not the Son of God' - and they, by the way, many of them say that it was Judas went to the cross rather than Christ - 'He did not die, the Son of God!'. But my friend, this is indisputable evidence that God is bringing to the case of Christ to show and prove to all without reasonable doubt that He is who He said He was. It is indisputable evidence, and to reject it is not unreasonable, it is unbelief! As one well-known writer said: 'Unbelief is not a misfortune to be pitied, it is a sin to be deplored'. The evidence is staggering, and to reject it, John says, you're making God a liar! You can call yourself an agnostic: 'Oh, I just don't know' - you should know! The evidence is stacked in Christ's favour completely.
That is the weight of their testimony after the three witnesses have given it, and then thirdly and finally John presents to us in the courtroom the verdict on their testimony, what the verdict could be. Verse 11: 'And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life'. In other words, John - and I love John, because he's black and white. Now I know not everything is black and white, but he says: 'Here is the record, take it or leave it, here's the facts: God has testified concerning His Son - God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son'. This is the record, this is the testimony, it's indisputable. Listen, you can't misunderstand language like that, it is clear and plain: the Christian faith is Christ, start and finish. It is Christ: He that hath the Son hath eternal life - and if you don't have the Christ of the Bible, and you don't have the Christ of history, you haven't got eternal life. Man, people need to hear this: you can use evangelical language, you can belong to a denomination that classes itself as evangelical, you can say 'I belong to the church, I'm a Baptist, I'm Presbyterian, I'm Brethren, I'm Episcopalian, I'm this that or the other' - listen to God's word: it's got nothing to do with all that! He that hath the Son hath life!

Have you got the Son? This is why we're being misrepresented and misinterpreted in this present age, because we're getting caught up with a lot of nonsense; when, if we were Christ-centred and Christ-focused, people would understand what we're all about. Man, this is important, have you the Son? Do you know the witness of the water, that He's the Christ of God from birth, sent from God's right-hand as the eternal Son, coequal with the Father? Do you have the witness of the blood that there on that cross He was atoning for your sin as your substitute, He was bearing the punishment of the wrath of God, exhausting it in a complete and finished work, rising again the third day? Do you have the witness of the Spirit in your heart that cries 'Abba, Father!', knowing that you're a child of God?

I don't know when you're going to die, I don't know when I will, it could be years away, decades away. I don't know when the Lord will come - some people think they know, but we don't know. The fact of the matter is: you can know your condition before God now. It's all to do with whether you have eternal life, and that's not a thing, that is a Person: this is eternal life, that you believe in the One that God has sent. Eternal life is not some gift in and of itself as a separate entity, it is the very life of God that He has given in His Son. All that John is saying here is what he said in John 3:18: 'He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God'. My friend, you don't have to wait until you stand before God's judgment to know whether you're condemned - you're condemned now! God has sent proof of who His Son is in the water, in the blood, in the preaching of the word that comes forth in the Spirit - what have you done with it?

I'm finished really, in all I have to say, save to point you in this case for Christ to verse 10. You see, your verdict doesn't have to be the right one, you can reject Christ and ignore the evidence, never have that witness of the Spirit that you're born of God. Now I'm asking all of you here tonight, it's not my wish to get anybody doubting their salvation, but listen: I'd rather get you to doubt it at some point and make sure, than go into hell thinking you're well saved and the transaction's done - and there's ones will do just that. Listen to me: do you have the witness of the Spirit that you're born of God? Romans 8 verse 16: 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God'. Galatians 4 verse 6: 'And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father'.
I'm not saying you'll never have any doubts - doubt the man that never doubts! But if you're growing in the Christian faith, you'll exhibit the signs that we have in 1 John: the sign of the knowledge and doctrine and belief of the faith of who Christ the Son is. You will have that social evidence and sign, loving the brothers in a continual constant fervent love. You will have the moral examination passed, where you obey the commandments of God - you'll fail now and again, but it's not going to be an habitual lifestyle of flagrant rebellion and sin against the Lord. Do you show the fruit of the Spirit in your life? That's how the Spirit witnesses with our spirit - do you have any witness? Please don't tell me you're not even reading the Bible, you're not even praying to God - and you want a witness? - and here's the truth of God's Spirit in it, and that's what gives you confidence.

Oh, my friend, make sure, because do you see when you are sure? I'll tell you this: there's nothing greater, nothing greater than to have the Spirit witness to the blood that I am born of God - that's everything! Now you know that I've been getting hooked lately on Wesley's hymns, and there's one I want to share with you. Do you know what he does? He takes this biblical theology and he turns it into a prayer in the form of a hymn. He grasps, as a hymn writer, many truths that I find no other hymn writers seem to do. He grasps the reality of the Spirit witnessing to the blood that we are born of God, and in this hymn he asks the Holy Spirit to move convicting and converting in power. I'm going to read it to you before we sing it, it's called 'Spirit of Faith Come Down':

'Spirit of faith, come down, reveal the things of God,  
And make to us the Godhead known, and witness with the blood.  
'Tis Thine the blood to apply and give us eyes to see,  
Who did for guilty sinners die hath surely died for me.

No one can truly say that Jesus is the Lord,  
Unless Thou take the veil away and breathe the living Word.  
Then, only then, we feel our interest in His blood,  
And cry with joy unspeakable, "Thou art my Lord, my God!"

O that the world might know the all atoning Lamb!  
Spirit of faith, descend and show the virtue of His Name;  
The grace which all may find, the saving power, impart,  
And testify to humankind, and speak in every heart.

Inspire the living faith (which whosoever receives,  
The witness in himself he have and consciously believes),  
The faith that conquers all, and doth the mountain move,  
And saves whoever on Jesus call, and perfects them in love'.

You're the judge, Christ's in the dock, God has presented three witnesses that agree in the water, the blood, and the Spirit. If you're not convinced, you'll never be converted.

Let's all bow our heads. Can I ask you: have you called savingly on Jesus Christ the Lord, the Son of God, believing who He is - that is, who He said He was, what God testified of Him, what He did at the cross for you, what He has said by His Spirit through the word to you. Cry out to that Jesus, and you will be saved. Believer, listen to me tonight, whatever you're going through: 'For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?'.

160
Lord, help us, like Wesley did and like John did, to grasp the fact that Your Son is Jesus the Christ, the only begotten of God - that He is everything, He is our faith, He is the Rock on which the church is built. May He be everything to us, corporately as a church and individually as Your people. Whatever we face in this life, may we be overcomers because our faith is in the Christ of God. Lord, let us go with the joy of the Lord in our breast from knowing that cry within our soul: 'Abba, Father'. Amen.
men. Turn with me to 1 John 5, and our reading will comprise - or at least our text for consideration - of verses 13 to 17, but I think we should read from verse 1 to get the flow of John's argument, which will be important later on as we consider some, not controversial as such, but difficult portions of this passage, indeed this book and the whole of the Bible. Our title tonight is 'Sure Life and Prayer'.

Verse 1 of chapter 5: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth". Verse 8: "And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death" - and we'll end our reading at verse 17.

As I'm sure you can appreciate, being the last verses of this last chapter, John is now concluding his letter. He is doing it by a discussion relating to five certainties that we can have in our Christian faith. We've seen already that the Christian faith, the authentic, historical, biblical faith is what has taken up John's attention again in this last chapter. So he gives us five certainties of this true Christian faith, and it's a powerful climax, as we shall see, to all that he has said already in this epistle of certainty and assurance. He hammers these certainties home by using the word 'know', seven times in these verses - verses 13 to 21, right to the end - he says 'We know', or he uses the word 'know'.

The first certainty is found in verse 13: 'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God'. It is the certainty of the assurance of the possession of eternal life, knowing that you're born of God, knowing that you are saved and have
partaken of salvation that Christ has purchased for you through faith. Then the second certainty that he mentions is found in verses 14 to 17, we'll not read all the verses as we'll consider them later on, but they relate to the certainty of answered prayer. One evidence that we are born of God is the fact that He hears us, and verse 14 is intrinsic: 'This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us'.

Then the third certainty is found in verse 18 that we didn't read tonight: 'We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not'. Whosoever is born of God and is begotten of God keeps himself, 'and that wicked one toucheth him not'. Victory over sin is another certainty that we can have if we are truly the children of God. It doesn't mean we'll never fall, and it certainly does not mean that we'll not struggle with temptation - perhaps all the more because of it - but we will know victory, and we ought to know it.

Then fourthly in verse 19 he says again: 'And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness'. This is the certainty that the Christian belongs to God, he is owned of God - what a certainty that is: to be able to say 'I am His and He is mine'! Then in verse 20 we read the fifth and final certainty that he gives to us in this conclusion: 'And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life'. The fifth certainty, that Jesus Christ is the true God. Of course, that had been doubted by some of these false teachers that had been infiltrating and influencing the church at Ephesus and many other of those infant churches.

It's true to say, isn't it, that 1 John is a breath of fresh air in this respect alone: that it is filled with absolute certainty. In contrast, there's not a lot of certainties about the day and age in which we live. Moral absolutes are not believed in any longer; spiritual convictions, people being convinced of them, are frowned upon and viewed as dubious; and personal confidence, to be able to say 'I know something', is seen as blatant arrogance, pride, or presumption. At worst certainties are seen as ignorance, and at best they are viewed by those in our world as naivete.

Very quickly, perhaps even without realising it, we can begin to relate our beliefs to what others believe, or what others think or even feel. John was living in a similar age. These Docetists who eventually became the Gnostics, they were bending, really, to much Greek philosophy and other influences upon religions that were round about them - those that were fashionable, intellectually appreciated. But John in a similar day is saying: 'No, the Christian should not bend to such pressure. What Christians say they believe should not be hazy or vague in their portrayal and understanding of what is truth. The revelation of Jesus Christ in the Gospel', John says, 'is absolutely sure, as are the benefits of those who exercise saving
faith in Him’. In other words, John is telling us in this epistle of certainty, he tells his people in his age and we in a similar age that our Christian claims ought never to be ill-defined or imprecise. They are absolute! They are definite!

When Sir James Simpson, who was of course the discoverer of chloroform, was on his deathbed a close friend asked him: 'Sir, what are your speculations'. Simpson replied: 'Speculations? I have none, for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day'. He was a believer. He may have been a scientist, and an eminent one at that, but eternal life and the matters of the great eternity and the reality of divinity were too vast and too great for speculations - he had to have his soul's future grounded on certainty, and the only certainty that he could find was in the Christian Gospel.

No, the Christian faith is not one of speculation, but certainty. We will consider the first two certainties of these five that John concludes with in his epistle; that being: first of all, the certainty of eternal life, which he outlines in verse 13; and from verses 14 to 17, the certainty of answered prayer. So let us look first of all at the certainty of eternal life.

You will recall at the beginning of our study that we pointed out that John's desire and reason for writing his gospel, that being the fourth gospel, is outlined for us in chapter 20 verses 30 and 31. He said: 'And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name'. The Gospel of John was written to convince people that Christ was who He said He was, that His claims and His work were valid and effectual. It was an evangelistic work. But we see from chapter 5 and verse 13 that we read tonight that his first epistle is written chiefly to those who have already professed faith in the Lord Jesus, those who say they have believed: 'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God'. His purpose for writing the epistle was that those professing Christians might know assurance, and the great Christian sureties and certainties that come from that.

So right away we see that John is saying that we can be certain, it is possible to be certain if our faith is based on the timeless truth and the changeless facts of who Jesus Christ is, and what He accomplished through His work on Calvary and His great resurrection power. Right away we see that Christianity is made unique in this claim: the faith of God in the Bible infinitely transcends all other faiths on this point, as it does on them all. The cults and the religions in our world: they cannot give the certainty of eternal life. You ask them, they cannot offer you the certainty of salvation - there is no assurance! Perhaps they will talk to you about the soul's destiny being determined by blind fate or karma, or perhaps they will labour an influence upon your personal performance to try to get you to work your way to heaven - but the fact of the matter is: the great spectrum of spiritual belief in this world really has no footing at all other than their works or blind fateful speculation. They certainly have not a firm enough footing to be able to say: 'I am sure that my soul is secure'.

Now we spent many weeks going through the cults, and that was enough to show us that they do not have any certainty. I'll never forget hearing the late Ivan Thompson tell the story - and you remember what a humourous man he was - of the two Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons coming to the door, I can't remember which. He went to answer it, and he knew who they were right away. After they started talking for a while, he pretended that he was having a heart attack. He fell on the ground, and he said: 'I'm dying, I'm dying, quick - tell
me what to do, how I can be saved!'. Whilst we see the humourous side, they tried to help him physically - but they had nothing to offer him for his spiritual need. Immediately there is a great expose of how the cults and these man-made faiths and so-called new revelations are impoverished to meet the major and greatest need of mankind - soul's salvation and the assurance of it.

This is how the Gospel of Christ is unique! Religion hasn't any certainty either, even the major religions. Roman Catholicism, after the Protestant Reformation, at the Council of Trent met in three sessions from 1545 to 1564, and it declared in 1547 in its decrees concerning justification that, I quote: 'Except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God has chosen to Himself. If anyone says that he will be certain, with an absolute and infallible certainty, to have that great gift of perseverance even to the end, unless he shall have learned this by a special revelation', that being a dream or vision, 'let him be anathema'. The Council of Trent pronounces an anathema on this theology that we hold dear, which is Biblical - that once justified by faith, we are saved and certain of our salvation and can have the assurance.

Cardinal Bellermine denounced the Reformation doctrine of assurance as, I quote: 'A prime error of heretics'. That must mean that John the apostle was a heretic, for he says that we can know that we have eternal life. Paul must have been a heretic, for he told us in Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of God, whether in life or death. We are more than conquerors through Him that hath loved us! Now here's the great question: the cults fail to offer this certainty, world religion fails to offer the certainty, whatever colour and hue it may be - but do you have this certainty? Now I agree that there are many uncertainties, but there's no uncertainties with this most important of issues. John says: 'Ye may know that ye have eternal life'. Do you know? Do you know?

I heard about a wee fellow standing by the roadside, and a man came by who was lost. He said: 'Son, do you know how to get to the town?'. He says: 'No, I don't sir'. Then the man said: 'Well, do you know where High Street is?'. 'No, I don't'. 'Well, where does this road go to?'. 'I don't know'. 'What do you call this street?'. 'Don't know'. Exasperated, the man said: 'You don't know anything really, do you?'. He says: 'Well, I know I'm not lost'. Friends tonight, there are many great questions in this world about this world, the life, the universe and everything - but there's one thing that we can know, and that is that we have eternal life. The greatest question, man's eternal soul destiny, you can know that it is secure as a certainty and assurance from God - do you know? Do you know that you're not lost? I can sit with you all night and debate this that and the other, but at the end of the day there is no greater question. You've gone and perhaps you've searched all sorts of directions and places, and you cannot find this satisfaction, this assurance, because it can only be found in Christ and His Gospel!

This epistle was written to give assurance to those who truly believed, but it was also written to expose those who may have false security. Now whilst, as one man has said, the best thing that the church can do for true Christians is to assure them of God's electing and everlasting love, the worst thing the church can do for non-Christians is to convince them that they are Christians. We rejoice tonight in the assurance that we can have, the certainty of eternal life if we repent of our sins and believe the Gospel - but it would be a travesty of the preaching of the Gospel faith of Christ if we were to tell you that you were saved if you weren't! There are many in our land from pulpits in Protestant and Roman Catholic churches who are giving people false assurances, the little Kingdom Halls and Meeting Fellowships of cults and various
religious sects - and they are actually leading people to hell through a false presumption of security that is not there!

Do you know that there is such a thing as presumption? Whether it's to say that because you're baptised as a child, or you keep the church rites and ordinances, or you're a communicant or member of this church, that church or the other - Protestant, Catholic, you name it. There is a presumption that is of the devil and not of God. That is why Paul came to the Corinthian believers, who were living in so much debauchery and sin, and actually asked them to question their faith, 'Examine yourselves', he said, 'whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?'.

So not only does John want to assure those who have truly believed that they are secure and certain in their faith, but he wants us to examine ourselves, he wants to expose those who are claiming and professing faith but don't really have it! How do you know? Of course, we've laboured this point week after week: there are the three tests, the doctrinal, the social and the moral. The doctrinal: do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? The social: do you love your brother? The moral: do you obey God's commandments? My friend, they're so simple, and yet I would hope that if you are truly saved that you have been challenged during this series over the weeks to examine yourselves, and ask yourself: do you believe, really, with all your heart what Christ said and what He did? Do you love the brethren? Do you obey God's commandments? But the antithesis of that is that if your assurance has not grown through testing your faith through these biblical means and proofs, that you should begin to doubt your faith, you should begin to wonder if you are really converted.

This is an epistle about assurance and surely we have to say, almost at the end of it, that we cannot underestimate the importance of assurance. Please listen to what I'm saying tonight: you can be saved and not have assurance. You can have assurance and not truly be saved. But the goal that John is giving us to aim at is that we should both be saved and have assurance, because it's only then that we can really be effective for God. If I'm not sure that I own a piece of property or even a piece of land, I'm not going to do much to improve it, am I? If I don't know that it's really mine, I'm not going to work hard if I'm not sure - but if I'm certain that I possess the title deeds, then I'll be keen to do all that I can to make it what it ought to be! Perhaps you're lacking a measure of vitality and energy in your Christian life: could it be that there are doubts niggling at the back of your conscience or deep down in your heart, whether you're really a believer? Maybe it's because these three tests have uncovered things that are not right with God. My friend, I encourage you to do what John tells us: bring those things into the light, confess them, get right with God and have your fellowship restored - for you'll never, listen to me, ever be effective for God unless you have that assurance!

D. L. Moody said: 'I have never known a Christian who was any good in the work of Christ who did not have the assurance of salvation'. I remember reading years ago about the building of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, some of you have probably been over it. When they started building there were no safety precautions and devices used, and because of that 23 men fell tragically to their death. However, during the construction of the last part of the bridge a safety net was constructed at a cost of $100,000 - which in those days was exorbitant - but it was worth it, because it saved the lives of 10 men. But the interesting thing about that story was that when they completed the bridge they discovered, through a very exhaustive study, that 25% more work was accomplished in the same period of time when the men were completely sure of their personal safety. They could get on with the work! They
had that security that they longed for, to put those questions and doubts out of their mind and throw all their energies into the work! Do you have that?

David Jackman says: 'Presumption and doubt put the sinner to sleep, but faith and assurance animate the believer to greater godliness - not least, the exercise of prayer'. You see, this is what John is coming to tonight in verses 14 to 17: you cannot be effective in a prayer life that is answered of God, and nothing will charge the force of your prayers more than assurance. Equally nothing will short-circuit prayer more than your doubts. You cannot be effective in prayer if you do not have assurance of your salvation.

So we've looked at the certainty of eternal life, and I would challenge you again tonight - it'll not be long till this epistle is finished, and you'll not hear it for a while - but make sure that you're in the faith. Secondly, the certainty of answered prayer is one of the benefits of this faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Look at verse 14: 'This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him'. That word 'confidence' in verse 14 could also be translated 'boldness' - this is the boldness that we have in Him. This word 'confidence' has already been used twice in chapter 2 verse 28, and in chapter 4 verse 17 regarding the confidence of the believer at the judgment because we are clothed in the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. But he also uses it on a third occasion in chapter 3 regarding this issue of prayer that he is now coming to. If you look at chapter 3 verse 21: 'Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight'. What is intrinsically important to answered prayer is that we have a clear conscience, not only with God but with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now he comes again to the certainty of answered prayer. Now I would hazard a guess that prayer is one of the hardest things that you find in your Christian life. Certainly, if it's not the hardest, it's the area where most of us have doubts from time to time. We ask questions like: 'I'm praying about this thing, but can God really do it?'. Edwin Orr, I think, wrote the book years ago: 'Can God?' - that's a doubt we struggle with from time to time. Another is: 'Does He really hear what I'm saying? I don't feel like He hears. Will He answer? Does God answer prayer today?'. What John is telling us is that if we have the assurance of our salvation, there outflows from that - or at least there ought to - a firm and unwavering conviction that God hears and answers our prayer.

Now I've asked you: do you have the assurance and certainty that you have eternal life? But here's maybe a more difficult one for some of us: do you have the certainty of answered prayer in your experience? We ought to have, through the faith in Christ that we believe, a boldness - now don't misunderstand that to be an arrogance or flaunting oneself in the presence of God, it is not some brazen attitude before the Lord. We ought to always have reverence, but the sense here I believe is freedom of speech - a boldness and a confidence so that when we come to speak with God, whether publicly or privately, that we are uninhibited, we are open; even a sense of being relaxed, not informal or over familiar, but a baring our heart before God that speaks of intimacy.

Hebrews 4 speaks of this: 'For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need'. You know as well as I do that if you trust someone, you'll open up your heart to them. You'll speak confidently to them because you believe that they only want the
best for you. You trust them, you understand their character, you know their motivation - and it is the same with God: we ought to have the same boldness and confidence, because we know what He says in His word, that His plans are to prosper us, not to harm us, that all things will work together for good to them that love God. We know His character, that He is holy, He will not harm us. We know His motives, we know that they're always good, they're always pure, because He loves us as sons and daughters.

So what John is saying is just what Hebrews 11 verse 6 says, that: 'Without faith it is impossible to please God: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him'. You see, faith will manifest itself in a boldness in prayer that believes that we are accepted with God, that God hears us, and ultimately that God will answer our prayers. Now if we come with such certainty in faith, what certainties can be ours in prayer? Now follow this with John, he says that when we come in faith this is the confidence that we have: He hears us, and we have whatsoever we ask.

Now let me categorise those two things like this: first of all, 'He hears us' literally means 'He answers us'. Secondly, 'We have whatsoever we ask' literally means that 'We get immediately what we ask for'. Now I'll stress in a moment that there are conditions and qualifications other than just simple faith for answered prayer in the text, but let's not miss the clarity and the import of John's words, because I think we often do. We come to verses like this that are so blatantly obvious in what they claim for us as Christians, and we stagger at them, we can't accept them! They're too good to be true! Yet what John is saying here is just what he recorded in the life of the Lord Jesus when He said: 'Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it'.

Do you believe that? In John 15:7 He said similar words: 'If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you'. What about John 16 verse 24: 'Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full'. John 15:16: 'Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you'. Now is that true, or is it false? John says it is a certainty if you know that you're saved, have the assurance of it, and come boldly by faith into the presence of God and are aware of these certainties of prayer: one, that He answers us; two, that He answers us immediately.

Now why am I taking that verse like that? Because in the English it would seem that John is saying that He hears us and He answers us, for that's what it literally says in the Authorised Version: 'We have the confidence that He hears us, and we have according to what we ask'. Well, James Montgomery Boice points out, and I believe him to be right, that that is not the point that John is getting at here. You see, when the Bible speaks of God hearing prayer, more often than not it means He answers prayer - that's the sense in the majority of cases at least. So when it says 'He hears', it's talking about answering. You might say: 'Well then, what does the second part mean, that we have whatsoever we ask? Is he just repeating himself?'. Well, actually what he's doing is: he's introducing a new idea - because the promise that he gives us here is not just that God answers us, but rather that because He answers us we have the items requested of Him now! That's the sense. When it says 'He hears us', it means 'He answers us'; and when it says 'We have whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions desired of Him', the sense is 'now' for the Greek verb is in the present tense.
So what is the promise? What a promise it is! It is simply this: not even that we will have the petitions that we ask, but we do have them even as we pray. Now I know right away unbelief is springing up in your heart, because this is laughing at your personal experience - but this is the word of God. I'm asking you: do you have confidence in these words? That God not only knows your need before you ask, but at the very moment of your asking - and there are qualifications that we will see in a moment - but I want you to grab the weight of this: God answers and answers immediately! You can't believe it! I know it's hard, but we have in the Old Testament a very good example of it in Daniel 10 verses 12-13, if you care to turn to it - and I trust you'll bear with me tonight regarding time, because there's quite a few things to get through and I want to do that tonight.

Daniel 10 verses 12-13: 'Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia'. The context of the story is that Daniel, for 21 days, for three weeks, prayed and fasted regarding a battle that God had told him of. Daniel was not aware of the battle that was going on in the heavenlies - as Paul tells us in Ephesians 6: 'We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness in heavenly places'. As far as Daniel was concerned his prayer wasn't answered until the twenty-first day, but God said: 'From the very first day that you lifted your voice to me, Daniel, I heard, I answered your prayer, I dispensed Michael the archangel - and though he got into a bit of a fight on the way down with the prince of Persia, it doesn't alter the fact that the first day you prayed I heard and I answered immediately'. You might say: 'Well, that's only one instance, and certainly it was immediate for Daniel, but it was not immediate in his experience' - and I agree with you, and it's not in ours either. But are we missing the fact that we are engaged in a spiritual battle, there's wrestling to be done! But from God's perspective, as one man has said, there's no pending tray with God. God hasn't our requests all piled up in the file, and He's working through them one by one and He's a wee bit behind with yours - that's not the way God works at all, get that out of your head! Maybe the problem is that we don't understand that we're in spiritual battles.

Then also we have to understand, as I've alluded to, that confidence in prayer must be met by the conditions of the certainty of prayer. What are the conditions? Well, first of all, the obvious one that we've laboured on tonight is the Christian faith. 'We have to be confident', verse 14, 'in' literally the Authorised says, but could also be 'confidence concerning Him, confident toward Him' - we have to believe in Him and have the faith of Jesus Christ. But then he says that we ought to ask, verse 14, 'anything according to His will' - and that is always the regulator concerning answered prayer. Indeed, in chapter 3:22 that we read he gives the same qualification: we get what we ask because we obey His commands - another qualification. Not only praying according to God's will, but living according to God's will. Even in those portions that we read from the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels, He qualifies and gives the conditions of answered prayer: 'Pray in my name', 'Remain in me and my words in you' - and ask what you will, and so on and so forth. You have to be obeying and living in Christ, and He in you - and therefore you will pray according to God's will that is found in His word.

Prayer is not a blank cheque, where you just ask for anything and everything. One children's catechism puts it like this, asking the question: 'What is prayer?’, the answer comes 'Prayer is asking God for things which He has promised to give' - that is profound. Prayer is asking God
for things which He has promised to give. What kind of earthly father would you be, or mother, if you indulged your child by giving them everything they wanted? What kind of children would you raise? You say: 'But it says we have what we have desired of Him' - but here's the key: it's after our desires have become His will, after we are abiding with Him in His presence, getting into this fellowship that John talks about. Don't be sitting here saying: 'Ah well then, that explains it, that dampens the whole thing down now. It doesn't seem as great a claim!' - not in the slightest! Look at the scope of this promise. It was David Livingstone, the missionary to Africa, who said: 'Our future is as bright as the promises of God'. What John says here is that our prayers are as powerful as the promises of God! It is, as Spurgeon says, our cheque-book from the bank of faith, and we ought to come by believing prayer and confidence, and plead these things with God on high.

You got to see it that way, and you can only see it through faith. It was Mueller, that great man of God who saw many great things done for God, and I don't believe he had any gift of faith or gift of prayer that people make out - all he had was the promises of God that you and I have. He said: 'Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, it is laying hold of God's willingness'. Where is His willingness found? In His word, that's where His will is found. My friend, we've got to get into God's word, and with boldness and confidence plead our faith before the throne of God. Those are the qualifications: confident in faith, but praying according to God's will - and we will have what we ask if our desires reflect His desires in His word.

Now, the third thing our praying should be is found in verses 16 and 17 and that is simply this: not only should it be bold and confident, not only should it be according to God's will, but John says it should be for others. 'If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death'. What John was talking about is the brothers, the Christians who were failing on occasion into sin - not those who are living a lifestyle of constant sin, we saw that they weren't brothers at all, they were unconverted. But those who occasionally stumbled, and of course we've all done that from time to time, the rest of the brethren were to pray for them - and now this is a promise, take it how you like, work it out with your theology, that's your concern - but here's what it says: if you pray for those brothers who stumble on occasion, they will be restored! That's a promise of God - you might have to work it through, I grant you that, but perhaps the reason why our prayers are not answered from time to time is what James says in James 4 and verse 3, that we don't get what we ask because we ask that we might consume it upon our lusts. In other words, we can be so selfish in our prayers.

What John is saying here is that a certainty of answered prayer is that our prayers are concerned with others, especially the brother who stumbles. Then John says something in verse 17, he also makes clear that there is a certain prayer that won't be answered. I often hear this saying: 'God never says 'no' to your prayers, he always answers prayer' - that is unbiblical. Here we see that there is a prayer that God never answers. Now he's not suggesting that we don't pray for things, but he is saying that there's a certain prayer that cannot be answered. If you pray for someone who has sinned unto death, verse 17: 'All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death', but in verse 16 at the end, he says 'There is a sin unto death'.

Now the great issue - and it nearly brought me to my death today! - is 'What is this sin unto death?'. I have to say to you this evening that I'm not sure what it is, and I think it's hard for anyone to be dogmatic because it is a very complex issue - but let me give some of the views very quickly of what this sin unto death is. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there are
two categories of sin: there is venial sin that can be pardoned whilst on the earth, but there is also mortal sin that automatically leads to death. So they would say that this sin unto death is a specific sin that comes under the category of a mortal sin, you have to go to purgatory to purge for it. Now the biblical view is that all sin is mortal sin, for Romans 6:23 says: 'The wages of sin is death' - so that's not what it means here.

Secondly, some people say it's the unpardonable sin that the Lord Jesus mentioned in Matthew chapter 12: 'Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come'. The problem with that interpretation, the unpardonable sin, something that God can't forgive you, is that it isn't specifically mentioned in the passage and neither is the Holy Spirit that the sin is meant to be against. Of course, the literal sin was attributing to the ministry of the Lord Jesus the motivation and animation of the evil one, that the devil was behind everything that Jesus did rather than the Spirit of God - and I think Jesus would have to be in His earthly ministry for you to literally commit that.

Then the third interpretation is the literal physical death, that this sin unto death is actually dying - as a Christian going too far in sin, and God having to pull you out of the scene. Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5 are a case in point. They lied against the Holy Ghost in the gift that they brought to the church, and they were struck down. First Corinthians 5:5, the man that sinned and was disciplined, if he didn't repent he would be devoured in the flesh by the evil one. Then in 1 Corinthians 11, there were those around the Lord’s Table in Corinth eating and drinking damnation unto themselves, in the flesh they were getting drunk and the Lord said that that was the reason why many were weak and sickly among them and many slept - meaning died.

Now that is a scriptural phenomenon, I believe that, but I’m not sure that that's what John's writing of here. If you look at verse 12 you will see that the context of the life that John has spoken of right throughout this whole book, but in this portion, is spiritual life - verse 12: 'He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life'. The other context of this book is the apostasy of those who were rejecting what Christ had revealed of Himself and the apostles had said and testified to, and also the faith, the historical, biblical faith - and to express unbelief in that was to lose your soul and be condemned already. I believe that - very tentatively, I have to say - that this sin unto death here is the denial of saving truth through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the salvation that He has procured. Someone has said that John is singling out those who have walked out of the community of God's people and openly denied the doctrines of salvation. No matter what they may once have professed to believe, they have put themselves beyond the reach of the church's prayers.

A similar line of approach is taken in Hebrews 6, whilst I agree it is a difficult passage, but it does espouse that there is a certain step that professors can take, and it's a step too far: 'For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame'. Just as the body, when it starves itself to a certain extent of food, the digestive system begins to reject the reception of any food, and eventually it becomes impossible - so if you refuse the offers of God's grace, you lose the very power to receive it.
Can I suggest to you tonight that, just as Romans 10:9 tells us that: 'That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved' - through that confession of mouth and heart, salvation unto life is brought, so a denial of Christ with the mouth and in the heart is the sin unto death. It doesn't mean that it cannot be forgiven of, but if persisted in it will not be forgiven. Indeed, in 2 John that we will look at in subsequent weeks, and in verses 9 and 10, John says: 'Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed'. We'll look into that in more detail, but those whom he is telling the believers not to even welcome into their home or bid God speed, he's also telling them here that there's no use even praying for them. He doesn't forbid prayer, but he says it's no use - because if they go on rejecting the Christ of God and the Gospel of God, that is the sin unto death, the sin of unbelief!

Now, as I close let me say this: we tend to spend, and I can just see that you're all looking in your Bibles and your concordances now, we spend the time on exceptions like this sin unto death, and not the central message of the passage. What is it? His point is this: we should be praying for believers who are falling into sin. There's a mighty resource here in prayer for us as believers: are we using it for one another?

'Thou art coming to a King,
Great petitions with thee bring;
For His grace and power or such,
You can never ask too much'.

Oh, that we would have such power with God and with men, to be confident as we pray in God's will that He hears and He answers our prayers! The leader of the 1843 Disruption in Scotland in the Presbyterian Church, Thomas Chalmers, once wrote in his diaries these words - and this is the desire of my heart, and I hope tonight it will be yours: 'Make me sensible of real answers to actual requests as evidences of an interchange between myself on earth and my Saviour in heaven'. Do you have sensible, real answers to actual requests as evidence of an interchange between you on earth and the Saviour in heaven? Not only is the certainty of eternal life your possession in Christ, but so is the certainty of answered prayer. May God grant it to you.

'Come my soul, thy suit prepare,
Jesus loves to answer prayer'.

Our Father, we want to thank You this evening for the certainty of eternal life that we have through Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to thank You for the certainty of answered prayer that can be ours when we abide in Christ and He in us. Lord, give us the realisation, the experience of such prayer - and though we have to wrestle before the answer reaches us, let us believe that it has been dispensed immediately when we pray by faith according to God's word. Lord, we know that there are great questions and considerations in all those statements - but Lord, help us not to lose faith in the midst of it all that Thy word is true, and though heaven and earth shall pass away Thy word shall never pass away. Lord, give us such pray-ers and give us such answers, for Jesus' sake, Amen.
Well let’s turn again, for the last time, to the first epistle of John - chapter 5. First John chapter 5, and we’re beginning to read from verse 18 to the end of the chapter, verse 21. Our title this evening is 'A Trinity of Certainty and Security'.

Verse 18: "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not. And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen".

Now we have learnt, as we have gone through these 16 weeks - now 17 this evening - that this epistle of 1 John is an epistle about Christian profession. It tests our profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and as such, therefore it is also an epistle concerning assurance. You would imagine that an epistle to do with assurance would reiterate some of the certainties of the Christian faith, and we have found that this epistle does exactly that. Of course, we saw last week - at least we began to look at it from verse 13 on - that John begins to use one of his most favourite words again, this word 'know', an expression of certainty. He uses it to speak of five certainties in conclusion of his epistle.

The first we looked at last week in verse 13 was the assurance of eternal life, indeed the reason why he wrote this epistle: 'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God'. The assurance, you can know that you have eternal life. Then in verses 14 to 17 he takes a bit more time on this second certainty, the certainty of answered prayer. We laboured the point, as he does, to show that there is this promise in the Christian faith. Of course, there are a few qualifications hung onto it, and we looked at those also - but yet we must not miss the point that we are promised in this remarkable verse, especially verse 14: 'This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us' - the promise that He will hear and answer our prayers.

Now we didn't look at the further three of those five certainties, we'll look at them tonight. Verse 18, first the certainty that we can know victory over sin and over Satan. The fourth, verse 19: we can know that we belong to God. And the fifth certainty in verse 20: we can know that Jesus Christ is the true God. Let me just reiterate what I said last week, that the first epistle of John is a breath of fresh air, I think, to 21st-century culture - especially in the West: because, unlike many, even in fashionable religious circles today, John is not tentatively suggesting a few hypotheses for our consideration. Of course, a hypothesis does not bring assurance, but rather right throughout, and especially of the end of this little letter, he makes clear affirmations for us: we can know.
I don't know whether you agree with me, but there's nothing worse - as far as I'm concerned - than to read, perhaps, the final sentence and the final chapter of a book, or see the final scene in a film, and find yourself left hanging, not knowing how it all ended and what the goal of the plot was. The author has a purpose in doing that - but that's certainly not a problem in John's first epistle. John has left none of us wondering what it's all about, he is the apostle of assurance. The atheist might say: 'I believe there is no God', John retorts 'I know there is a God!'. The agnostic might say: 'Well, I'm not sure whether there is a God or not', John says 'I am absolutely sure that there is a God, and not only is there a God, but I know who that God is, I know how that God has revealed Himself, and - wonder of wonders - I know that that same God loves me'.

It is the language of biblical Christianity, the language of assurance, the language of certainty, the language of affirmation. Whilst we are always to remain humble about ourselves, we ought also always to remain confident about our Christian affirmations - what God has revealed concerning our faith. Can I say that I believe that that is why biblical Christianity is so unpopular today: because of her affirmations. You see, we live in a world that despises absolute truth. We seem to live in an age with more and more knowledge, yet fewer and fewer certainties. In fact, someone has said: 'A specialist is someone who knows more and more about less and less, until finally he knows all there is to know about nothing'. That seems to be the world in which we live!

Even Albert Einstein said: 'You imagine that I look back on my work with calm and satisfaction, but there is not a single concept of which I am convinced that it will stand firm. I feel uncertain whether I am in general on the right track'. Listen to this: 'I don't want to be right, I only want to know whether I am right'. That's profound, isn't it? 'I don't want to be right, I only want to know whether I'm right'. A British novelist, J. B. Priestley, once declined an invitation to write an article on his own religious beliefs, explaining that he was perhaps better able to deny than affirm - that's the age in which we live. It denies rather than affirms, but he added with a touch of sadness to those remarks: 'I regret this, because now is the time for gigantic affirmations'. He couldn't have said truer words, and that's why Christians - if ever there was a reason - why Christians need to affirm the definite certainties of the Christian faith and its truths, it's because we live in an age of uncertainty, and age that despises absolutes.

Now if we live in a world that despises absolute truth, we also live in a church that has come to despise dogmatism. I heard a story about a youth leader who was dodging some searching questions from his young people, and he gave the general answer to cover them all: 'Well, we'll never know the answer to those things until, perhaps, we get to heaven'. One young girl was heard to say in the audience: 'I guess you get the facts in school, but here at church you just get opinions'. That's frightening, but that's the way things seem to be today to a large extent - because, in the classroom and through the media, young people are told that evolution is not a theory, it is fact; that there is no God; that religion is some kind of substandard, sub-intellectual philosophy and way of life and belief. Then those young people and older people come into the church, and from the pulpit opinions of men are expressed, conjecture - what we need today is the authoritative preaching of the affirmations of God's word! Yet there is despising of dogmatism even in the church.

We have to be very aware that we can cultivate a culture of uncertainty even in Christianity. Now I'm not suggesting that, like some, we walk about like doctrinal prigs, thinking that we've got all the answers. None of us have all the answers - but let us affirm what we do
now! There's a great deal we do know in the Scriptures, and let us stand confidently upon those great truths. I think it is this despising of dogmatism that perhaps goes to explain the rise in popularity of the ecumenical movement, ecumenism. Ecumenism is an attempt, really, to eliminate affirmations in the interest of unity - sacrifice our dogmatism in order that we can come together in harmony and call ourselves 'Christians', or even just call ourselves 'Worshippers of God'. That is why we ought to oppose and despise ecumenism, because it ignores our Christian affirmations, and therein it strikes fatally at the very heart of what Christianity is: Christianity is the certain affirmation of our faith, and if it's not certain it's worth nothing!

This point is graphically illustrated in an incident that took place during the Reformation. It involved Martin Luther and a man called Erasmus of Rotterdam. It was at the beginning of the Reformation, and Erasmus was a partial supporter of Martin Luther who regarded Luther to have some right views. Indeed, Erasmus was the man who put together that first text, Greek text, that the New Testament was taken from in German and English, and what we eventually got our Authorised Version from. He was a humanist, that doesn't mean he was a humanist like people around today, he believed in reason and that we should search for knowledge - hence he wanted to publish the original Scriptures, and that was a good thing. Well, as the Reformation developed, it was obvious that Erasmus did not have the same spiritual affirmations and certainties as Martin Luther. Consequently, as the years rolled on through the Reformation, Erasmus became increasingly distressed by the thought of the rupture that would occur in Christendom because of these doctrinal differences. As far as he was concerned, it horrified him that Luther could be excessively dogmatic, to be willing to allow a schism in the church.

At last he was encouraged, Erasmus that is, by some friends to publish his thoughts, and he wrote a book defending the freedom of the human will in spiritual matters - and effectively attacking Luther's convictions. What did Martin Luther do? Do you think he gave in? Do you think he admitted that he was wrong? Did he modify his dogmatic stance to suit the sensibilities of his opponents? No, he didn't: he replied with another book entitled 'The Bondage of the Will'. It was an able defence of the Christian certainty that we believe that man is fallen, a reaffirmation of the Bible's teaching on the depravity of man's will in spiritual things. Now in that book Luther declared these words, and they're profound, listen: 'Nothing is more familiar or characteristic among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity'. Addressing, in this book, Erasmus, he said: 'Why then do you assert that you find no satisfaction in assertions, and that you prefer an undogmatic temper to any other?'. That reveals a great deal concerning many even in religion today, because many possess an absolute denial of absolutes - have you ever noticed that? They deny absolutes in the one breath, and then in the next they say that Christianity cannot be true - that is an absolute statement! It's a stance that denies itself.

But thank God for John's first epistle, an epistle of certainty for his age and ours, which are ages of uncertainty. John completes his epistle with three affirmations of certainty that we're going to look at tonight, and one warning in the very last verse. So let's look at the first, the first affirmation of certainty is a certain holiness, a certain holiness. It's found in verse 18: 'We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not'. In other words, John is saying: we know that the Christian is not given over to sin. Of course, we've touched on this right throughout the whole epistle, and we've even considered the question: is John contradicting himself from what he has said in chapter 1 and verses 8 and 10?
Look at it please, right at the very beginning, for he said there: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us', if we say that we don't have a sinful nature that is fallen before God. Then in verse 10: 'If we say that we have not sinned', if we claim that we do not commit sin, 'we make God a liar, and his word is not in us'. Now clearly John is not contradicting himself, and we saw what he means in chapter 3 and verse 9: 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin', and we saw that the tense there has the sense 'go on committing habitual lifestyle sin', 'for God's seed remains in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God'. Of course a Christian falls into sin, that is why in chapter 1 and verse 9 he leaves us a provision that if any man sin, we can confess our sins, and God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. Chapter 2 and verse 1: 'If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous'.

But though a Christian sins from time to time, he must never become a prisoner to sin, for if he does it is prime proof that he is not a child of God. So we're not talking here about perfectionism as some would make us believe, but Christian purity - the certainty of holiness. The Christian may sin occasionally, but what John is saying is that the Christian must never sin continually. There is a warning to any who entrench themselves in a constant lifestyle of sin: you're not a believer. I don't care whether you tell me about some experience you had, or some confession you made: God's word says that if your life denies your testimony and your claim, you're not saved. The new birth necessitates new behaviour. You're not saved by works, but the evidence of your faith are works.

Now here are two reasons why John gives us this certain holiness as one of these Christian affirmations, the affirmation of Christian purity. The first reason he gives us in the verse is the parentage of the Father. We are born of God, that is why we do not sin. Then the second reason is the protection of the Saviour: 'he that is begotten of God keepeth him'. Now let's deal with the first: the parentage of the Father. We are born of God, we are sons and daughters of God, we do not continually sin because we are meant to have the nature of the Father, the very nature of God! John is telling us that when we are born from above, the very life of God comes to reside in our lives, it abides in us. Now, we still retain the old nature, that old nature that will sin - but we now have been given by grace through faith a new nature that detests sin and loves God, and they strive with one another. As we walk in the light as He is in the light, and feed our lives by faith, not by sight or by self or sin, we find that the new nature grows stronger and dominates. That is why we can take the family name: 'Christian', because we have the family nature, that we're like Christ in some way, and we're like our Father.

So if we are continually living in sin, John says, and loving our sin, we ought not to feel comfortable taking the name of 'Christian' - because we clearly evidence a nature that is not of God and is not Christian. There is the question: what nature do you exhibit? I think I've told you before the story of Alexander the Great in the heat of battle, riding to and fro on his horse, and he notices a soldier retreating and deserting the field. He gallops up to him and he says: 'Soldier, where are you retreating to?'. He hung his head, and he said: 'I don't know'. The general said: 'What is your name?'. He replied: 'My name is Alexander'. The general looked him straight in the eye and he said: 'Soldier, either change your name or change your direction'. That's what John is saying to us: either change your direction, or change your name. You cannot call yourself a son of God and live like a child of the devil! That is not biblical Christianity.

The parentage of our Father, and we as sons, is the reason why we do not continue in a lifestyle of habitual constant sin. The second reason is the protection of the Saviour: 'He that
is begotten of God keepeth him'. Now, what John's doing here is he is turning his attention from the saved to the Saviour. When he speaks here in verse 18 of 'the begotten of God', I believe he is speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, some don't interpret it that way, but I believe that's what the text actually says. The Saviour keeps the saved, it is the begotten of God that keeps him, the Christian. Literally the word 'keep' means 'guards'. It's the word used to refer to a garrison of soldiers that guard a fort, and the picture is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, guards our hearts.

Now I know that there are places in scripture where we are exhorted to keep ourselves, indeed in this very verse 21 of the chapter: 'Keep yourselves from idols'. 'Keep yourselves', in another place we're told, 'from immorality'. 'Keep yourselves', Jude says, 'in the love of God'. But we see here the reason why we need the Saviour guarding us when we find out who the enemy is we're guarded against: 'And that wicked one', at the end of verse 18, 'toucheth him not'. That's why we need the Saviour to guard us, only the Lord could protect us from the devil! Jude tells us that even the archangel Michael could not bring a railing accusation to him over the bones of Moses, how could we resist him? Only steadfast in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, because he wants to take hold of us - that's what that word 'toucheth' actually means. He wants to grasp hold onto us.

The word that's used here is the same word that the Lord Jesus used to Mary after His resurrection when He met her in the garden, in John 20 verse 17 the Lord said: 'Touch me not now, Mary, for I have not ascended to my Father and your Father'. The word 'touch' literally means 'cling' - don't cling to me now, Mary, and this is what the devil wants to do to us! He wants to latch hold like a limpet upon our lives, and gain an influence over us. That's why we need the Lord Jesus guarding our hearts - but praise God, here's the promise: the very One that is begotten of God keeps us, that that wicked one touches us not.

Now let me explain this more by a biblical illustration that I think is very informative regarding this issue. Luke chapter 22, and we read there of Peter's experience just before his temptation to betray the Lord, and his failure in doing just that. Verse 31 of Luke 22: 'The Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren'. Now the fact of the matter is, though Peter failed the Lord and betrayed Him and denied Him, his faith did not finally fall. He was converted, he was restored, and he did become the great herald of the day of Pentecost - the reason being that the Lord prayed for him. Though Satan desired to sift him, the Lord was guarding him, and the Lord was praying for him.

We could point to Job, and we see there that Satan could not touch Job but by permission of Almighty God. Now I know that God gave him permission, but Satan could only go as far as God allowed him - thus far and no further. I know that Satan can be instrumental in all our lives, but isn't it good to know that he can't touch us without God's permission? That ought to give you a certainty, and whenever Satan does attack us we therefore can know that if it is with God's permission, God will also give us the power to overcome in that attack - for He has promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that 'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it'.

Maybe you're here tonight and you're going through what you perceive to be an attack of the evil one himself, and you're crying out from the depths of your soul: 'How is that possible? What's the secret to overcoming?'. We find it in 1 John chapter 2 and verse 14, and even
young men who face all sorts of roaring temptations from the devil in their youth can know this victory: 'I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong', here's the secret, 'and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one'. In John 15 the Lord Jesus said: 'If my word abide in you, if I abide in you, and ye in me' - that's the secret, it is abiding, and God's word abiding in you. Ephesians 6: it is the sword of the Spirit that overcomes the wicked one, and deals the deadly blow to all his devices.

It's amazing to me how many defeated Christians have to admit that they haven't got a time and a place and a method to read God's word. Have you read God's word today? Maybe you're asking the question: 'How can I overcome the evil one in my life?' - and you're not even reading God's word. That's the secret. Perhaps you're here this evening and you don't always feel that you have a hold of the Saviour? I think there are times when all of us feel like this for one reason or another, but do you see this affirmation? What John is actually saying to us is that no matter how often we feel we have no hold of Him, He has hold of us! That is what our faith rests in: Christ, His word, His promise, His oath, His covenant, His blood. 'I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one' - hallelujah! That's what Toplady expressed in the hymn we sang at the beginning, a certainty:

'A Sov'reign Protector I have,
Unseen, yet forever at hand,
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles, and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend;
And walls of salvation surround
The soul He delights to defend'.

Praise God we have a certain holiness, a Christian purity that we can know is ours because we are the sons and daughters of God, with God's nature - and if we are in Him, and abiding in Him by faith, we have the protection of the Saviour from sin, from self, from Satan himself. The first certainty, a certain holiness.

Then the second is found in verse 19, a certain identity. Let's read it: 'We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness'. A certain holiness was a Christian purity, and this certain identity in verse 19 is the Christian's position. 'Christians know', John says, 'that they belong to God and not this world' - that is a Christian's certainty and affirmation. Assurance of this comes by displaying the tests that John has been outlining for us right throughout this epistle. You remember what they were: the test of righteousness, that we obey God's commandments; the test of love, that we love our brothers and sisters in Christ; the test of sound doctrine, that we believe what the Scriptures reveal about the incarnate Christ and His Gospel of grace.

Now I know that some of you maybe have been thinking: 'But where does the ability to fulfil these tests come from?'. It doesn't come from us, otherwise that would be works. The ability comes from the fact, as we looked at in the previous verse, that Jesus keeps the Christian from sin and from Satan, that abiding in Christ gives us that strength because the life of Christ abides in us. It's not of us, it's of God! It can only be a proof of divine life if the divine life is in us, those tests don't save us - don't be going out and trying to love your brother,
trying to keep the commands, trying to believe what's in this word if you've never come to Christ and had that divine new birth experience. It is proof that Jesus lives within, that His protection is ours.

But here's the tragic circumstances that unbelievers often do not realise, and it's this: if you do not have the Lord Jesus Christ protecting you, and you do not exhibit these tests of assurance, you're not protected. You're open! You're fresh game to the devil! You're already prey for him, and for all that is in this world. I'll tell you this: do you see if you give Satan an opening in your life, even as a believer, he'll have you! Even believers need to beware, because John says that this whole world lies in wickedness, or lies in the lap of the wicked one. Not so long ago, going through the book of Judges on Lord's Day mornings, we were looking at the character of Samson. You remember that one day in his experience he fell asleep on the knees of a compromised situation, Delilah. Because of that slumber in his sin and compromise, he lost his power, he lost his testimony. The unbeliever often is completely oblivious to the fact that they are lying in the arms of the devil. That's strong stuff, but that's what God's word tells us.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4 that: 'If our gospel be hid, it is hid from those that do not believe, for they are blinded by the god of this world' - that is not Jehovah, that is the devil! He has blinded them, they're oblivious to it - but praise God this evening that the believer does not lie in the lap of the wicked one, that's why you ought not to love the world. For John says the believer knows their certain identity, that they belong to God, not this world. Do you know your position as a Christian? If you do, it'll be reflected in your life. Do you ever sit down and watch the news, and say to yourself: 'What is wrong with this world?'. Here's the answer - it would pay all the newscasters, wouldn't it, commentators, columnists, to read this verse, verse 19: 'The whole world lieth in wickedness'. That's why there's so much bad news! It's under the power, the control of the evil one! This world system is the devil's playground, that's why believers ought not to be dabbling in it; and that's why it's often a sign, if they're dabbling in their whole lifestyle with sin, that they're not a child of God.

Now I'm not saying that God is not in control, of course He is, and we have His revealed plan within the Scriptures. God is sovereign and the believer knows where he stands: he does not belong to this world, he belongs to Almighty God. What a certainty! Isn't that wonderful tonight? To know that as you look all around you and are distressed in heart with what is going on both in world and church, that you can have the certainty of identity - 'That might go on, but it doesn't touch me for I am God's'. That's not pride, friends, that is your identity.

The first affirmation: a certain holiness, Christian purity. The second: a certain identity, Christian position. The third is a certain revelation. This is the most fundamental of the three, verse 20: 'We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life'. A certain revelation - you remember that these Gnostics, or at least the forerunners to the Gnostics, some feel that they were called Docetists, certainly there were Docetists whether they were formed at this time or not is unknown, but certainly it was the embryo of this heretical doctrine. This belief that they had a special revelation from God that was superior to these believers in the early church - and of course their revelation was that Jesus was not the Son of God, but the Christ-Spirit came upon Him at His baptism, and left Him before His crucifixion. So the Man born in Bethlehem was not God's Son, but the Man Jesus who became the Christ - the Christ-Spirit left Him before He died, so Jesus Christ, 'Christ' did not die for our sins nor did He rise again. But John
comes in with an explosive statement that lays flat the whole of this heresy and strikes at the root and heart of Gnosticism: 'We know that the Son of God is come'.

Do you hear it? How it would have come to that church, to those Gnostic heretics, 'and He has given us an understanding' - you claim your charismatic revelations, but Christ has given us an understanding 'that we may know him that is true, His Son'. Just in case it wasn't clear enough that a Man born in Bethlehem was the Christ, the Son of God that died and rose again, he says that 'him that is true is his Son Jesus Christ, the true God and eternal life'. John's clarity is astounding, but here is what we need to affirm: that our faith is rooted in what God has done in history. He has sent His Son. His Son came into the world to give us knowledge both of God as the only revelation of God, but to give us knowledge of salvation - and He, and nothing else, is the heart of Christianity!

Not only has He come, but John says He has given us an understanding that we may know Him. There's a beautiful illustration of this that John gives us in his Gospel if you would turn with me to it, John chapter 9. Christ has given us an understanding, in John chapter 9 we read the account of a blind man. I want you to remember that this man could not see Christ, he did not know God or Christ, neither did he seek God or Christ. We find out in this chapter that the Lord Jesus sought him out, and the Lord Jesus healed him. Then, when the Lord Jesus gave him his sight, the Saviour takes him on a journey of mind and heart, a spiritual growth to reveal Himself to this man who is blind not only in eyes but in heart. Look at verse 11, this blind man: 'answered and said, A man that is called Jesus made clay, and anointed mine eyes' - a man that is called Jesus. Then in verse 17 he progresses a little: 'They say unto the blind man again, What sayest thou of him, that he hath opened thine eyes? He said, He is a prophet'. A man Jesus, now He is a prophet. In verse 33 we read: 'If this man were not of God, he could do nothing'. Now He's not just the man Jesus and a prophet, but now He's clearly and distinctly of God. Then verse 36: 'He answered and said', to the Lord Jesus, 'Who is he, Lord', speaking of the Son of God who Christ has talked to him of, 'Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him?'. Then in verse 38 Christ reveals Himself: 'Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him'.

We have an affirmation this evening that Christ not only is come into the world, but He has given us an understanding of who He is and how He has revealed God to us - and we fall at His feet, and we say: 'My Lord and my God!'. Let me say this to you this evening: a true, saving knowledge of Christ means that you will recognise Him as the true God, just as verse 20 says. I believe that the 'true God' there in that verse speaks of the Lord Jesus - some say that it refers to God. But here's three reasons why I believe that it doesn't just refer to the Father, but to the Lord Jesus: first of all, the last one spoken of before that statement 'This is the true God', is His Son Jesus Christ. So that's the grammatic order. Then secondly, the Son of God is spoken of as 'eternal life' in chapter 1 of this epistle and verse 2 - the Father is never ever described as 'eternal life'. Then thirdly, this interpretation to say that this is speaking of God the Father doesn't make sense, to say that the true God is the true God is a truism - it's stating the obvious, and it's unworthy of Scripture. But what it does say, and what it means, comes as an amazing natural conclusion to the whole of this epistle - what is it? That this Christ Jesus is the very Son of God incarnate, who has been sent in human flesh to be our Saviour! God has revealed Himself in human flesh in the incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ.

Now you remember at the introduction of this epistle I put a slide up on the screen, and I've referred to it as we've passed through, how this epistle is like a spiralling staircase. Do you remember that? How we have revisited again and again the same themes, and how each time
we revisit a theme John, the Holy Spirit of course, enlightens us to some new truth regarding it. But imagine this: we've climbed all the way up to the top of the staircase, and what do we find? It's the throne room of divinity! Who is there? It is Jesus Christ as God! John tells us that anything that is short of Jesus Christ revealed as God is idolatry.

Have you ever read this epistle and wondered why this last verse is there? 'Little children, keep yourself from idols'. This is the warning, do you know what he is saying? He's not necessary talking about pieces of wood and stone and precious jewels, and whilst John was writing probably to Ephesus, and we know that it was a city wholly given over to idolatry - there was the temple of Diana of the Ephesians, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Acts 19 tells us that many people had their living making little gods of Diana and of the temple and so on and so forth. These people were surrounded with literal idolatry, but he's been talking about what we think about Christ. By inference he is telling us that if we have a substandard view and understanding of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, it is idolatry!

We don't take it as seriously as God's word does. If you do not believe that He is the only begotten of the Father, if you do not believe that He is coexistent with the Father and with the Son, that He is one substance God, that the Godhead is revealed in three distinct Persons but one essence being God, it is idolatry! Christians are meant to have turned from idols to serve the living and the true God. Anything that is in the place of the historical, biblical Christ is an idol - anything! It doesn't have to be a literal idol, it doesn't have to be the theological idol concerning a substandard view of Christ, it could be an idol in your heart tonight. A house, a car, a job, a loved one, it could be anything.

An old anonymous Keswick hymn, one verse went like this:

'Draw and win and fill completely,
Till the cup o'erflow the brim;
What have we to do with idols
Who have companied with Him?'.

If you have had the true Christ who is God revealed to you and you've enjoyed His company, what have we to do with idols who have companied with Him? John's desire throughout this epistle, surely you've realised it by now, is that he should get us to a place of assurance. Paul said in Corinthians: 'We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one', and this God is revealed through His Son, Jesus Christ. Look at what we find out in assurance in this epistle: chapter 2 verse 5, we are in God, we know it; chapter 3:14, we know that we have passed from death unto life; chapter 4 verse 16, we know that God will answer our prayers. Go throughout the whole of Scripture, Romans 8:28: 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God'; 2 Corinthians 5:1, 'We know that if this tent, this earthly house of tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'. Paul could say in 2 Timothy: 'I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day'.

Christian affirmations! Christian certainties that ought to give us assurance because they're all in the Rock, Christ Jesus! Even concerning things that we don't know and don't understand, Paul says: 'For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face-to-face; now I know in part, but then I shall know even as also I am known'.
John the beloved disciple wrote this epistle. John the beloved disciple who leaned on Jesus' breast - that's what he wants you to do: to lean on Jesus in complete confidence and certainty that He is everything we need. 'This world lieth in the lap of the wicked one', but we can say 'Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on His gentle breast'. Blessed be His name. I trust that this series and this message has been a blessing, and has bolstered your assurance, or shaken your false assurance.

Oh our Father, we want to thank You tonight that the Son of God is come, and He has given us an understanding of that which is true, for He Himself is the only true God - the way, the truth and the life - and He has brought us to Thee, Father. We worship at His feet and Yours, and we thank You for this affirmation of our faith: that if I have Christ, what need I more? Lord, help every person here tonight, whatever their spiritual condition may be, to rest their head on the pillow this evening with the affirmation of faith that their head rests on Jesus' breast. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - March 2006
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Let's turn to the second epistle of John, if you can't find it there's something wrong - it's just after 1 John that we've been in for such a long period of time now. Some of you have been asking me already am I going to get through it tonight! You should know better than that! We're only going to get, I think, through to verse 3, 4 at the most - but we want to spend time, because this little book is packed full of truths that we need to learn. Some of them we have already encountered in our first epistle, but nevertheless they're worthy of repetition particularly in the day and age in which we live. So let's read it, we'll read the whole of this chapter - I've found that reading this chapter, when you're studying it, reading it over and over again, by the time you're finished you've memorised the whole of the chapter. So I'm hoping that will be the case for us on a Monday evening, that by the time we finish this - no matter if it takes us five or six weeks or so - that we'll know it off by heart.

"The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth; and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth; For the truth's sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever. Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father. And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it. For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds. Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of thy elect sister greet thee. Amen".

If you've just come in, we're looking at the second epistle of John. We have finished our studies in the first epistle, and now we're in 2 John. This book has been called by some 'A postcard from the apostle John', due to its brevity and due to how it is packed full of great detail. It probably fitted on one sheet of papyrus, which is what the ancient writers wrote on - but although it is extremely short, one of the shortest books in the whole of the Bible, it is weighty in its doctrinal and practical content. It may be short, but it's heavy with truth and instruction for all of us.

So I want us to ask a few questions of this book this evening, and I believe as we ask them and get the answers, we will be favourably instructed. The obvious first question that I want to ask and give an answer to is: who is writing this letter? You might say: 'Well, that's obvious, it's the second epistle of John, so it is John the apostle'. Well, if you look you will see in the first verse that the one who signs it calls himself 'the elder'. John is not mentioned. 'The
The word 'elders' is the word in Greek 'presbuteros', which is used in the New Testament for the word 'elder' or 'overseer', sometimes it's translated 'bishop' - but it's also used relating to a person's age. So it could be classifying here that the one who is writing is an older man. It could be a reference to age, or it could be a reference to position.

Now traditionally it has been thought that the author of this book is, as I said, the surviving apostle who accompanied the Lord Jesus, John the beloved. Yet in recent days there has been much modern debate whether or not there actually were two Johns - John the apostle and another John, John the elder. Now let me say right away that I believe that the cause for such doubt is unfounded. I'm not going to go into the details why folk think that, save to say that to the contrary the apostle Peter had no problem both calling himself an apostle and an elder. If this reference to the elder doesn't refer to his age, though John at this stage would have been a very elderly man, and refers to the fact that he was a presbyter or in overseer in the church, that's quite all right - because Peter did exactly the same thing. We read in 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 1, Peter says: 'The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed'. Peter was widely accepted and recognised as an apostle, but he also calls himself an elder.

Indeed, if you read the second epistle of John, along with the first epistle and the third epistle, you will see that they are very similar in their character and in their content - indicating that they have the same author: John the apostle, John the elder, the disciple of the Lord Jesus. In fact, these epistles are so alike that Irenaeus, the church father way back there in the early church, actually thought that the second epistle of John was part of the end of the first epistle, before these divisions of verses and chapters were interjected into our Bible.

But there's also a devotional aspect to who is writing this book, for he just calls himself 'the elder'. Whilst that causes a little bit of a problem for us in this day so many years after the event of the writing of this epistle, it's worth noting that the people who he was writing to knew exactly who he was. That adds to the intimacy of the letter, for instance: if a father writes a greeting card to his daughter, he'll probably sign it 'From Daddy', or 'Love Daddy'. The daughter knows exactly who her father is. Whilst other people, strangers who may look at the card, wouldn't have a clue of his identity, she knows. In that sense, John just addresses the church as 'the elder' - they know exactly who he is.

This is a tremendously intimate letter, it's very personal, it is a pastor's postcard to his people - because, as we read it, we see that truly the sentiment within it comes from a shepherd's heart. May I pause there for a moment: here is an apostle who sees fit to describe himself as 'the elder', and we see that he has a shepherd's heart. That is a qualification of an overseer, to have a pastor's heart, a shepherd's heart that is willing to care, and tend, and even lay their life down for the flock. John primarily deals with, as we've already seen in the first epistle, the truth concerning the family of God and the fellowship that we enjoy: how we can know that we're one of God's children. In a sense there's a similar theme within his second and third epistles - but just as he has elaborated as he went through those themes in 1 John, he does this again in 2 John.

Paul the apostle has died, and Peter, both of them sealing their testimony with their blood - and now we're getting from the oldest surviving apostle who knew the Lord Jesus Christ not only truths regarding fellowship in the family of God, but instruction regarding practical aspects to fellowship within the local church. That is extremely practical, because here we find
ourselves in a local church, or from whatever local church you have come from this evening - these instructions are applicable to us today and relevant. So we can't afford to ignore them.

Who is writing the letter? It is none other than John the apostle, though he calls himself 'John the elder'. He is an overseer and he is a pastor to these people, and he shows his pastor's heart. Then secondly the question we need to ask is, obviously: to whom is this letter addressed? 'The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth'. Now, like many of the Scriptures that we ponder every Monday evening, there are several views of interpretation on them, and there are generally three views - several more, but I've summarised them into three for you tonight - regarding who this elect lady is that John is addressing the letter to. The first interpretation is that this is a figurative term for the church, you know how the church is called at times 'the bride of Christ', and some believe that this is speaking of the universal church, or indeed the local church that John was writing to, having application to many churches round about that may have received this letter.

A second interpretation is that this is actually a woman whose name is 'Elect' or 'Electa'. In the Greek language it is 'Kyria', and it's the same word corresponding to the Aramaic name 'Martha', and both 'Martha' in Aramaic and 'Kyria' in Greek mean 'lady'. So some have concluded that this is a lady called 'Kyria' or 'Electa'. Then a third interpretation is that, well, this is a personal individual, but it is an unnamed Christian lady. This lady, it is said, has a family. These are 'her children' spoken of in verse 1, but these children are not only among her family, but among the family of God - and they comprise some of the members within a local church that is actually meeting in this woman's house: all the elect of God, according to the foreknowledge of God.

Now, let me analyse at least two of these views for a moment for you, one negatively and one positively. It does seem plausible, in a sense, when you look at this woman and her children, to think that this could be referring to the church, as she is called 'the bride', and her children being members. Even in verse 13, if you care to look down to it, John sends greetings from 'the children of thy elect sister'. It would almost seem that this is a sister church whose members are greeting the members of this particular church that John is writing to. Now my first objection to that view is that it doesn't seem to be the obvious reading of the text. If I could teach you a little lesson here in the course of what I'm saying, it is the axiom of interpretation which says: 'If the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense'. Sometimes we can read too deeply into some things in scripture, when the plain meaning, the most obvious meaning is the truest one. I don't think that many of the people in the church would have associated this woman with some kind of representation of the church at large.

The view I favour is the third one, and that is that this is a true lady, a real lady. John, yes, is addressing a company, for he uses the plural in verse 6, he uses plural also in verse 8, verse 10, and verse 12 - but he also uses the singular in verse 1, to this lady, verse 4 and 5, and verse 13. So we see that he's addressing both an individual and a company. I think perhaps the answer to this quandary is that John is writing, addressing first of all this lady who he loves in the truth, but he's also addressing through her a company of believers, her children both in family but also members within that church who were meeting in her house.

Now we have examples of this already in scripture. If you're quick enough you can turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 16 and verse 19 for a moment. We read there that Paul speaks of the churches in Asia saluting the Corinthians: 'Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house'. Priscilla and Aquila had a church in their house. Then when we turn to Colossians, a few pages over, to chapter 4 and verse 15, we see that Paul
again brings salutation to: 'the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house' - the church in Nymphas' house. Then in Philemon and chapter 1 and verse 2 he sends greetings: 'to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house'. Philemon had a church in his own house.

Now let me bring all this together, I believe this is who he is addressing: this elect lady, who has a church in her house, some of her family are in the church but they're meeting together as a group of God's people - some of them family, some of them just general members of the assembly of God's people - and he's writing to them, warning them of false teachers, of infiltrators, and he's warning them that they could come into the church via the family, through that family into the home. You see, from a false teacher's perspective in this particular instance, to invade the home would be to infiltrate the church - do you see it? If they could get into the home, they could get into the church.

Turn with me for a moment to Titus chapter 1, because Titus faced this exact same problem in Crete. Titus chapter 1, and verses 10 and 11, Paul writes to Titus and warns him: 'For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake'. Now if you were with us yesterday morning, you would have seen in the closing chapters of the book of Judges, specifically chapter 19, that as the home goes so goes the church, or God's worshipping community, and as the church goes so goes the nation. The home and what goes on in it has a knock on effect to the church, and the church has a knock on effect to the nation. It's interesting in this particular instance to see how often Satan can use the family to bring false teaching into the church. Do you ever think about that? It's often through a family member that belongs to the church. How much more is this applicable in the case, in this first century instance, when the church was actually meeting in family homes? For if false teaching got into the family, it got into the church!

That is to whom this letter is addressed: the elect lady, her children, and the church in her home. That is why in verse 10, and we will ponder this in later weeks, John says: 'If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed'. It wasn't just a matter of refusing hospitality to false teachers, but by bringing them into the home she was effectively bringing them into the periphery of the church - and that was forbidden. So we've answered the question: 'Who is writing this letter?' - the elder, John the apostle. To whom is the letter addressed? To the elect lady.

Thirdly the question we must answer is: what motivated this letter? Now we've already touched slightly on the background circumstances that precipitated this correspondence from the apostle to this elect lady, but I want to elaborate on it for a moment or two now. There was a Christian custom that in the first century there was a widespread ministry of itinerant teachers and preachers. So in the early church, there were many who were travelling about preaching the Gospel, teaching the word of God, prophesying for God in an itinerant manner. Now immediately this posed a problem: the problem being accommodation, where would they stay? When nightfall came down and they had done their work of open airs or preaching from house-to-house, where would they lie down for a night's sleep? Who would tend for their bodily needs?

Now it appears from the reading of historical sources that inns during the first century tended to be little more than brothels. The Rabbi in the Mishna, which is a Jewish oral law and tradition, placed innkeepers on the lowest scale of human degradation. Indeed, Plato actually labelled innkeepers as pirates - they were the lowest of the low. So it was obvious that
itinerant saints preaching the good news of the Lord Jesus wouldn't feel comfortable staying in such places. So these evangelists and ministers of the word of God would receive hospitality and food, and sometimes money, in Christian homes. So right away you can see how obvious it could be that this custom would be abused by false teachers and false prophets. It appears that exactly that took place.

Some of these religious charlatans saw an opening to exploit the custom of charity among God's people for their own diabolical ends, whether it was simply for an easy gain of money, or to spread their heretical doctrines such as Gnosticism, Docetism that we considered in the first epistle of John. Whatever the reason was, they got in. Now it is possible, although we don't know for sure, but it may be that this elect lady actually wrote to John the elder for guidance and advice concerning how to discern who was a true teacher and prophet of God, and who was a false. Then, after discerning whether or not they were true or false: how to handle them, how to deal with them if they came to her door wanting admittance not only to her home, but ultimately to the church.

So, understanding this historical context, this ancient Christian custom, surely you can see what a potentially great problem this lady and the early church was faced with. In fact the Didache, which is a second century book of church order, one of the earliest fragments that we have, it lays down strict rules concerning itinerant preachers and teachers. They had rules in the early church, it's like an early code of conduct, guidelines for both churches and ministers of the word to follow. Now the Didache clearly states that these individuals were only to stay one or two nights in a household, and if they were to stay any longer, or if they asked for money or anything over and above their lodging or the food that was recognised as necessary for their needs, they were to be recognised and pronounced as a false teacher!

In fact, the Didache uses the term 'they are to be viewed as a Christ-monger' - someone who is seeking to live off the reputation of the Gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ for false gain. You can see how seriously the early church considered false teaching and false teachers. I think it is also significant that this warning against antichrist and anti-Christian teachers was addressed first of all in this letter to a woman. When we consider, as Timothy tells us in his book, that sin first entered through Eve, the woman who was deceived - and I know that's not very popular among the feminists, but they've themselves to blame I'm afraid! Timothy was told by the apostle Paul that that's how sin entered into the world: first Eve was deceived. Then we find that Timothy had faced this problem in Ephesus, if you turn to 2 Timothy chapter 3 for a moment, this is a practical example of how these false teachers actually honed in on individual women in their homes. Second Timothy 3 and verses 6 and 7, Paul says to this young pastor and teacher: 'For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth'.

So Paul has outlined to Timothy how sin first entered through Eve, Satan subtly tempting her. Now he begins to expound the fact that these false teachers make a special appeal to women. They get into women's houses, they take them captive, he says, with gullible motives, women laden down with many sins, led away with various lusts - and they will listen to anyone, yet they themselves are never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. Even today the cults and the false sects, they tend to call at the door in the daytime when many women are at home, and men are perhaps out at work. This is a warning that was applicable to John's day, and it's applicable to our day. We need to make sure when we go round the doors, and when we call on people's homes, that we are never misunderstood to fall into this similar category. There
was a danger here, and this is what motivated the letter - especially when we consider the Christian customs of this day.

Who is this that is writing the letter? It is John. To whom is it addressed? It is the elect lady. What motivated the letter? This issue of these travelling itinerant preachers, and the danger that false teachers and prophets could use this as a means to proliferate their lies. Now fourthly, and perhaps more importantly, what message is contained within this letter? Well, ultimately we think that it is the answer to this elect lady’s question: how do we discern that a man coming to our door to preach in the church is a true teacher and prophet of God? And if we find that he’s not, how do we deal with him?

Now the crucial issue, as it was in 1 John, is the same in 2 and 3 John - that is, the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In fact, in verse 1 and verse 2 of this epistle you will notice that he uses this word 'truth' four times in the salutation alone. He tells us: 'The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth'. He loves her in the truth, that is the fellowship of love, the church has a fellowship of truth and love. Then we see he addresses it to: 'all they that have known the truth'. That is the fellowship of knowledge, you don’t only love the truth and love those who know the truth, but you have yourself a knowledge of the truth. Fellowship of truth, a fellowship of knowledge, and then we see that in verse 2 he's writing: 'For the truth's sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever'. The truth's sake is what is at stake here, and so this is a fellowship that not only loves the truth, and knows the truth, but it's a fellowship that values the truth and defends and preserves the truth - because the truth is what is at stake.

Now of course that leads us to the question: 'So what is the truth?'. I think we have it in verse 3, the fourth reference to truth in these first three verses: 'Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love'. Grace, first of all, is the truth. What is grace? It is God's unmerited favour. We don't deserve to be forgiven of God, but this is the starting point of salvation, Ephesians 2:8-9: 'By grace are ye saved through faith'. God has lavished His love upon us in an undeserving manner. Then he greets them and salutes them by this word 'mercy'. Grace is undeserved favour, mercy is pity shown to those who are guilty and wretched. If grace gives us what we don't deserve, mercy is God withholding His hand to give us what we do deserve - wrath, judgment and eternal punishment.

So what John is saying to us is: yes, love is extremely important. He has expounded that for us numerous times in his first epistle. He has spoken already of how he loves this elect lady and her children in the truth, but this is the important factor: we are not saved by love, we are saved by grace. I believe that that is the point that John is getting to in his salutation. Yes, grace is love that pays the price, but God loving us alone is not enough: that love must be willing to stoop in grace to reach us where we are. So in order to have fellowship with God, and in order to have fellowship with each other, it's not enough to love, John is saying, we must have a knowledge of the grace and the mercy of God. Then if you look at verse 3 we'll see that the end result of God's grace and mercy imparted to us is peace, and harmoniousness that comes as a result from grace and mercy!

What does Romans 5 and verse 1 say? 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'. Justified, being declared righteous with God, we have peace on the grounds of God's grace, and the grounds of His mercy - we enjoy this tranquillity of mind and heart. All of these three blessings: grace, mercy and peace, John says in verse 3, are 'from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ'. Now I hope you're still with me,
this is what John is getting at: the grounds of our salvation is not found in love, the grounds of fellowship is not ultimately found in love - though we must love one another - but it is by grace, by the mercy of God, but that grace and mercy comes from God the Father via the Lord Jesus Christ His Son. The Father is the source of this grace, the Son is the channel of that grace, and significantly John is putting the Father and the Son as equal - so what is he saying? Now listen carefully: the fellowship we enjoy in the local church and in the universal church is not upon the aspect of love, it's not enough just to love God, it's not enough just to love one another in Christ, so-called - but it is upon the grounds of grace and mercy and peace from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me explain it: truth, the truth that we have fellowship in, is first of all grace and mercy; secondly it brings lasting peace through justification by faith; and last but not least, it comes from God the Father via God the Son. That means that this truth is all about the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 14 verse 6 He said: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' - but there is a trinity of truth: the Son who is Truth incarnate; the Spirit who leads us into all truth, 1 John 5:6, John 14:16-17; and then there is God's word that we hold in our hands tonight, 'Thy word is truth', John 17:17 - but all of it is about Christ! In verse 2 John is getting at the point: this is the truth that sustains us, and will be with us forever.

Now what is the relevance of all this? Well, let me pin it down for you. John is saying, on the issue of the truth that is Christ and His salvation that is imparted to us by grace and by mercy, bringing peace from God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ: the Christian faith stands or falls on that! What is the truth that unites us together? It's not love - whilst love is important - but it is grace, grace that has brought us into fellowship with God and His Son. It is the truth about Christ, the Saviour of grace and the Gospel of grace - it is that truth that lives and lasts forever in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now I know I'm repeating myself over these weeks, and I'm not a bit sorry for it! Because we need to hear this, and we need to become more Christocentric in our theology, in our doctrine, in our practice - that Christ is Christianity! The truth that John is talking about is the ground of our fellowship, it is timeless, it is dateless, it is unchanged, it is constant, because it is Jesus Christ - the same yesterday, and today, and forever. He is the faith, as Jude said in 3 and 4, who 'was once and for all delivered to the saints'.

Surely you've got it by now? That means, friends, that this truth that unites believers in local assemblies and across the world, it is not subject to fashion. It cannot be subject to fad, it is not something fickle, it doesn't fluctuate, neither does it evolve - whatever theologians might try and tell us. It is fixed because it is Christ, Christ incarnate, Christ in the word, Christ coming to us in His divine influence by the Spirit - it is all about the eternal Son of God!

Now I know what people say today, and you hear it through the media - 'But when the Lord Jesus was talking about being the Son of God, He was just speaking in the manner that we're all sons and daughters of God'. This has come into vogue in the New Age movement, but it's far from new, it's an old lie of the devil that many of these early Gnostics were imbibing. They say: 'Well, Christ was just referring to Himself in that way' - no He wasn't! Even the Jews understood what He was saying when He said: 'I and my Father are one', John 10 - because the Jews, it says, took up stones to stone Him! Jesus said to them: 'Many good works have I showed you from my Father, for which of those works do you stone me? The Jews answered him, saying, For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God'. They understood what He was saying! That is the truth of the Gospel: Christ being the eternal Son, coming and dying as such, and bearing our sin and
rising again - the Jews knew what He was talking about, and we need to know what He’s talking about! Sometimes I wonder!

Do you realise if He wasn’t a man, He couldn’t die for your sins? Without the shedding of blood there is no remission, that’s why He had to take flesh and blood as children do, in order to die. But equally so: if He was not the Son of God, He could not satisfy the holy God of heaven in all of His just demands, He could not make a perfect, and also an eternal sacrifice for sins forever. Listen to this, in an age that says doctrine divides - and beware of anybody who tells you not to preach or listen to doctrine - we need to realise that the doctrine concerning Christ is everything, and if we don’t have it right we’re lost!

The great American statesman, Daniel Webster, one day was dining in Boston with a group of distinguished men. Some had Unitarian leanings - if you don’t know what that is, a Unitarian denies the Trinity and the deity of the Son and the Spirit. When the subject of religion came up at the table, Webster boldly affirmed his belief in the deity of Jesus Christ, and his confidence in the work of His atonement at the cross. 'But Mr Webster', said one man, 'Can you comprehend how Christ could be both God and man?'. 'No sir, I cannot comprehend it', Webster replied, 'if I could comprehend Him, He would be no greater than myself. I feel that I need a superhuman Saviour' - hallelujah! We need a superhuman Saviour. Here is how to discern - it's very simple, you don't need a degree in theology to do it - how to discern that which is false and that which is true, one diagnostic question: What think ye of Christ, whose Son is He?

The truth about Christ and His word is the ground of fellowship. Not sincerity, banish the thought! Not sincerity, because this was part of the dilemma here in this church in this woman's home - what are we talking about? Well, Christians, like today, felt that they were meant to be welcoming people, they were meant to be accepting. There already had evolved this culture of hospitality, not only in Eastern society but also in the church, accepting these wandering itinerant preachers. If you multiply that and accentuate it more by the fact that he's writing to a woman - you know what some of the women are like, you feel obliged to cater and care for folk and accept them. John is saying to these folk: do you see after you discern? You've got to learn to be able to say 'No'!

Now I know that's hard to do, but John is telling them it's for the good of your family, and it's ultimately for the good of the church - because for John there was a deadly difference between truth and error. It wasn't simply diverse opinion. I wonder at times why - it just shows you how blinded people are, but sadly even folk in the church - why people say that sincerity is enough in spiritual things. Yet we don't apply that same rule to other things in life. I mean, would you say as long as your doctor is sincere, you don't really care what he believes? Going under the anaesthetic: 'Doctor, are you sincere?' - I’d rather ask him does he have his exams! I don't care how sincere he is! Or a teacher - you want to know that a teacher teaching your child knows what they're teaching, knows it to be true, and is convinced. What about a chemist? I heard the little quip:

'Shed a tear for Jimmy Brown,
Poor Jimmy is no more,
For what he thought was $H_2O$
Was $H_2SO_4$' - that's sulphuric acid by the way!

You need to know, and there needs to be sincerity, yes - but you need to know that what you believe is right, because you can be sincerely wrong and that is fatal! So there's a dilemma
here that we have in our modern day, and that is: how do you reconcile truth with love? It's still a dilemma today, because people think when you stand for truth that you're being unkind, that you're impolite - I've even heard it said that it's un-Christian! That's the way people talk, but we must beware that in zeal to love other people, there's a great danger that we lose discernment, that we lose discretion, and we lose the balance between love and truth. I know that some are guilty of being all truth and no love, and I think that that's our error here - but equally there are those who are guilty of love all of love but no truth. I think it's very interesting to note how much heresy and how much malpractice comes into the church through imbalance. It's not always something is wrong, but an imbalance or an extremism in one or another area.

So John - and he does it, he personifies it himself - he is expressing love, but how is he doing it? He's expressing love, warning against false doctrine! That's how he is loving these believers! I've got to bare my heart to you, because there's a namby-pamby, sentimental, tiptoe-through-the-tulips type of love that's displayed as Christian love today - and it turns my stomach! Folk who wouldn't say 'Boo' to a goose, and really wouldn't say a negative word about anything or anyone, lest they be thought of as being un-Christian. Now I'm not saying we go out arrogantly and antagonistically, and rub everybody up the wrong way - but this is evidenced, you see it yourself. You maybe go to a person who's a Christian, and you ask them a straight question, and sometimes you never get a straight answer - have you found that? Sometimes it's a fear to offend you, or not tell you what you want to hear - but here we see a loving tender shepherd coming to his beloved flock, and because he loves them he gives them straight answers! John the beloved, we're sure of straight answers from him - and praise God we've got it, because he doesn't leave us in the dark in a similar age today as what he lived in then.

Indeed, one of the Gnostics in the second century was a man by the name of Marcian - if you studied church history at school you would have heard about him. He once asked Polycarp, who was an overseer in Smyrna and also a disciple through lineage of John himself, Marcian asked him: 'Do you recognise me?' Do you know what he said? 'I recognise you as the firstborn of Satan' - he was a heretic. That's what Polycarp said to him: 'I recognise you, yes, as the firstborn of Satan'. So much for open-ended tolerance! You see, it was important in the first century to warn people about heretics and about religious profiteers - what would the apostle have said today with the plethora of cults and cable Christian television blurring out all the vilest filth and scum of hell that you can imagine?

John is telling us, as he told them, if your home and our churches are to be true to Christ, if we are to oppose false teachers and false doctrines, you've got to know the truth - it's as simple as that. You can love till you're red in the face, it's not enough. Love is important, the greatest among faith, hope and love is charity - love - but you've got to know the truth, friends. How do you learn the truth? You learn it by carefully studying God's word. Now, can I bare my heart to you again tonight? I have a great burden and a great concern, and it's simply this: the Christian's personal study of the Bible is almost extinct in the 21st-century. Who read their Bible today? Who studied their Bible this week? I couldn't get statistics for our nation - but I'm told that 11% of Americans read the Bible every day, and there something like 40-odd percent, 50% maybe, Americans who claim to be born again. I don't know whether that's true or not.

I had a recent experience that illustrated this for me. Some folk had been very kind to give me a load of books - I don't know whether it did me much good or not, but nevertheless I had doubles of some of them. I decided I would give them to someone else, and I was thinking
about folk that I could pass them on to. Do you know something? I had a hard job, because there are very few - especially among young men today - who are studying God's Word. I'm not talking about dabbling - some who think they're studying, they're not studying at all, and the shallowness of their study comes across in some of the error that they propound at times. But who is really getting to grips with God's word? Who? Studying it, reading it, don't tell me it's too difficult! I'll tell you what the problem is: laziness, apathy, affluence, the love of other things! This is why there is so much error tolerated in the church today, because people don't know the truth - but it's not only about learning the truth, it's about loving the truth. Maybe that's where the problem is: we don't love it enough to learn it.

John, as we are going to find in subsequent weeks, tells us here: it's not about learning it and loving it alone, it's also about living it - huh, that's a different thing! Do you see this word for 'truth' that John uses? It could also convey the idea of 'reality', as opposed to appearance and hypocrisy. You see, John is saying the truth that we are united in in fellowship is not some objective thing like a Bible, or even the incarnate Christ alone, but it's subjective in our experience of it in our personal lives. You see, God, when He wanted to convey His revelation of truth to men, put it in flesh! Believe it or believe it not, His intention is to do the same today with you and with me. That's why he rejoiced in verse 4, greatly, that he found the elect lady's children 'walking in the truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father'.

We're not only to know the truth and love the truth, but we're to live for the truth's sake and walk in the truth. Christian, that's what the church and the world needs more than anything today - not just your knowledge of doctrine, and even your love of it, but your life that is filled with the reality of God's truth. As a man said recently to me: 'As Christians we are selling ourselves for more than we're worth'. The words are large, the claims are great, but the lives are shallow and poor! I heard the story about a shopkeeper that said to his new employee: 'Now lad, wisdom and integrity are essential to the retail business. By integrity I mean, if you promise a customer something you have to keep that promise, even if it means you lose money'. 'And what', asked the teenager, 'is wisdom?'. He said: 'That's not making any stupid promises'.

We make a lot of claims - are they stupid promises when we see our lives measured beside them? Are we living up to them? As Christ was the living embodiment of truth on the earth, so our lives ought to be - and if we profess to know truth and love truth, we must live by truth.

Our Father, we thank You that Your Son is the Light of the world, and he that followeth Him shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. We thank You, Lord, that when He ascended He sent His Holy Spirit, who has brought light to our hearts and minds through the truth. We thank You that He moved men of old to write the pages that we have before us - Thy word which is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path. Lord God, forbid that any of us as individuals, or as churches, should lean on our own understanding - but Lord, we pray that we will be directed in our paths by our Lord Jesus and His precious word. Lord, give us a fresh love for the Bible and for the Lord Jesus. Though we lose everything else, may we cling to them. Amen.
Now we're turning in our Bibles again to the second epistle of John, and if you missed the last week that we were here, you may have missed the fact that we have now changed our studies from 1st John - which we've now concluded - to 2nd John. This is, as I've said, our second study in it - and, God willing, perhaps the next time we meet, the week after next, we will be able to finish this and then go into 3rd John. So do pray to that end, so that we can complete John's works this season.

So we're turning to 2nd John, and we'll take time to read the whole epistle - there's not much of it. Verse 1: "The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth; and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth; For the truth's sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever. Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father. And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it. For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds. Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of thy elect sister greet thee. Amen".

Now if you were with us in the last study, where we had a kind of introduction to this second epistle of John, you will remember that we asked certain questions of this very brief epistle. The first question we asked was: who is writing it? That may seem an obvious question, but the answers that men give today are not one and the same - but we concluded, and if you want to know what those variant answers are you can get the recording, we'll not go into them tonight, but we concluded, we believe correctly, that the author is the elder John, who is one and the same as the apostle John, the last surviving apostle who was with the Lord Jesus Christ during His ministry. That is the same man who wrote the Gospel of John, the first epistle of John that we have studied, and the last epistle of John, 3 John, and the book of the Revelation, the Apocalypse - the same man, the elder, the apostle John.

The second question we asked was: to whom was this letter written? Of course, we have the answer in verse 1: 'the elect lady'. Of course, there are various interpretations of that. Some interpret it metaphorically as meaning the church, and I even heard after the last study that an interpretation I didn't mention was that some see it as Israel. I think all those things are stretching biblical interpretation somewhat. We believe that this was indeed a literal Christian lady in whose home the church probably met, and that church was made up most likely of
some of the members of this lady's family - that's why it is addressed not only to her, but to her children whom John says he loves in the truth.

Then the third question we asked was: what motivated the writing of this epistle? We found that it was a Christian custom in those days that there was widespread itinerant ministry - that is that people, evangelists, teachers and New Testament prophets would have moved around assemblies ministering the word of God. As they moved around in this itinerant fashion, they would be accommodated by the saints in their homes. Now, religious charlatans, we believe, began to abuse this hospitality and they exploited it as an opening for teaching their heresy. It is possible, though it is conjecture, reading between the lines, that this elect lady wrote to the apostle John asking for guidance to discern who was a true teacher among these itinerants; and if she found that a certain teacher who was asking admittance into her home and into the church was false, how should she handle him.

So we find the answer to that question in the fourth question that we asked last time: what is the message that is contained in this letter? The message that is contained is: how to know who is true, and how to handle those that are false. So John tells us: it is those who know the truth, those who love the truth, and those who walk in the truth regarding the Lord Jesus Christ, of course, who should be admitted for fellowship. But whoever does not manifest those criteria and attributes, are to be rejected and refused fellowship in the assembly, and indeed in her home - because the assembly met in the home.

Now last time we looked at verses 1 to 3 answering those questions, but we really looked at objective truth concerning who Christ is, that is the incarnate Word of God, the Son of God come in flesh. We also looked in verse 3 at how Christ saves us, look down at it - it is by grace, through God's mercy, He imparts peace to us 'from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love'. So this truth, the subjective gamut of the Gospel that we believe, and that must be the only grounds of fellowship and admittance into church fellowship, is the truth concerning Christ: who He is, that He is God manifest in the flesh; and what He has done; and how He can save us by His grace.

Now in verse 4 - we're going to look at it right through to verse 6 tonight - John begins to write about subjective truth. What is that? That is the incarnation of truth in the personal experience of the individual Christian. The objective truth of our faith is that Christ, the Son of God came in human flesh, our flesh apart from sin. But now he's looking at the subjective truth that there is to be an incarnation of the truth of Christianity in the personal experience of the lives of Christians. In other words, the subjective truth of the Gospel ought to be manifest in the walk of the Christian.

So not only does John say that we ought to know the truth - the truth about Christ, who He is, what He has done, how we can be saved - but we ought to be a people who love the truth, and not only have a passion for the truth, but we ought to walk and practice truth. Now right away, just like 1 John, we see that 2 John, as 3 John, are epistles all to do with fellowship. So John's primary theme of importance is that fellowship must always be on the grounds of truth. Truth is of prime importance. But now John is telling us from verse 4 on that if truth is real, it will be loved by Christians, and it will be lived by Christians.

So we have an example of this in verse 4. John says: 'I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father'. The apostle is expressing personal joy at having found, in these children of this elect lady, truth. But not only a knowledge of it, or even just a love of it, but a practice of it - they were walking in
truth! I wonder how many of us it could be said of tonight are 'walking in truth'? I'm sure that most of us know the truth, maybe we even love the truth, but do we walk in the truth?

Now whether John actually met these children in his travels, or perhaps just heard a report of them, he was rejoicing - ecstatic - to realise that this subjective incarnation of Gospel truth was being seen in the members of this church, and possibly the members of this lady's family. Now notice it does say in verse 4: 'of thy children', which could literally be translated 'some of thy children'. That may imply that not all who met in this house, or used to meet in this house, were walking after truth - perhaps some of them were beginning to follow the false teaching of these false preachers. But John's joy, note, was a positive thing: he wasn't concentrating on the negative, those who were following error, but he was rejoicing in the manifestation of truth in the life of these believers. They were obedient, and it brought great joy to this old apostle. He expresses the same thing in the third epistle and verse 4, look at it: 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth'.

Now there is an obvious application of verse 4 to us all, because if you're a leader in the church, an elder or a pastor, which is one and the same thing, when church members walk in truth it brings great joy to the heart. I think sometimes we fail to appreciate this. Also the converse is true: that when church members don't walk in the truth, it brings, or at least it ought to bring pain and heartache to the heart of an elder and a pastor. We thought yesterday morning in our ministry of the frustration that our Lord Jesus experienced at the disciples in Luke 9 verse 41 because of their faithlessness, unbelief, and their failure in many spheres. He said, exacerbated with them: 'How long shall I put up with you?'.

I wonder have you ever considered that this is one of the occupational hazards of an elder and pastor? It is being frustrated at times at the lack of progress among God's people, the fact that they don't walk in truth as they ought. But do you know what is worse than breaking an elder or a pastor's heart? It is grieving our Heavenly Father's heart. Now of course the glorious alternative is what John is emphasising, and we don't want to miss that: that it brought joy to this elder's heart and, we believe by inference, God the Father's heart that they were walking in truth. So this is how you bring joy to the heart of God: to walk in truth.

Right away we're seeing that John is defining, maybe redefining truth for us all. He's saying: 'Look, this is not something that you just believe in your head as a doctrine or dogma, or an item on a list of basis of belief. It's not even something that you hold in your heart alone, but God's truth is something that ought to be lived out in the life, it ought to be manifest in everyday behaviour' - and that is what truly brings joy to the heart of God! I'm sure all of us would concur tonight that it's easier to talk about truth and preach about truth, and even perhaps debate and argue about the niceties of truth, rather than actually living it. It has to be said that some zealous Christians disobey the very truths that they strenuously defend. But here is the bottom line, John is saying: if your walk does not measure up to your words, your words are worthless! That's serious stuff, especially in evangelicalism, because we're big on words and the Word - but how does our walk measure?

A Doctor of Divinity was living in the same house as his son who was a Doctor in medicine. One day the phone rang and the maid answered, and the voice on the other end said: 'Is the Doctor in?'. She replied: 'Which one do you want? Do you want pills or prayer?'. On another occasion she answered the phone, and she was heard ask: 'Do you want the one who preaches, or do you want the one who practices?'. But that's a serious question, isn't it, to us all? Are we only preaching, or are we practising? You see, we fail to see at times that though we believe with all our heart in the incarnation of Jesus Christ the Son of God, we fail to see
That's why in 1 John 2 and verse 6 that we looked at some time ago, John said: 'He that saith he abideth in him', that is Christ, 'ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked'. To walk in truth is to walk as Jesus walked, to walk in Christ-likeness! So how do you walk in truth like Jesus walked? Well, he tells us in 2 John verse 5 through to verse 9. Now what John seems to do there is give us a short summary of three themes that he has repeated over and over again in his first epistle. Those are the tests of life, how you can know that you're in the faith, the manifestation of the eternal life within. Of course, we've seen it many times over the last number of weeks, but here we have it in verse 5: we see love mentioned, the commandment that we've had from the beginning. In verse 6 he speaks of obedience, obeying Christ's commands. In verse 7, we've already seen it in the first three verses but we'll see it again in verses 7 to 9, there is the doctrinal test: what we believe concerning Christ and the Gospel.

John summarises again for us - now maybe you're sitting here thinking: 'Here he goes again, these three tests! You're repeating yourself an awful lot in these studies, David!'. Well, it's not me, it's John is repeating himself! May I remind you that it is the Holy Spirit of the Living God who is repeating Himself through the inspired writer. If I could be as bold as to suggest the reason that it is repeated: it's that we might get the point! John is asking us: have you got the point yet? Well, have you? Huh, we've been studying it for some time, but have we got the point? What is it? That it is so important to know the truth, doctrinal test. It's important to love the truth, it's important to love our brethren, but it's also important to obey the truth - that is, walk in it. If you haven't got the walk, it's not worth anything! It's about life, that's John's point: this Gospel is about life and living!

Well, have you got that point after our study in the series of 1 John? Are you aware, personally, of manifesting more and more these signs? Understanding more about Christ, understanding more about what He has done in His Gospel. Do you find a greater love for your brothers and sisters in Christ having studied God's word? Do you find a greater capacity to obey God's commands? Or is it, has it been just another Bible study? Filling your head full of more knowledge - that's another frustration of the preacher! Sometimes you feel that you don't get much return on your expenditure, that is that there's little effect and people don't get the point! Now this is why John keeps repeating over and over again these themes, and summarises them again in his second epistle: so that we might get the point and not miss it! I want us tonight to reassess our own position as John recaps on these tests - we'll only get two of them done this evening, we'll look at the doctrinal in greater depth next week.

Here's the first, the apostle's first appeal is found in verse 5, let's read it: 'Now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another'. Now what is John's first appeal? It is this: to walk in truth means we walk in love. Truth is the ground of fellowship, but if we have that fellowship the proof of it, that we own the truth and are fellowshipping in it, is that we walk in love. This is a commandment that is not new, we've had it from the beginning, and I believe he speaks there of the fact that in John 13 verse 34 the Lord Jesus said: 'A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another'. It's not new to these Christians, because they've heard it already from the Lord Jesus Christ - he is repeating it. But it's also new coming from the lips of the Lord Jesus, because though the law gave a command to love your neighbour and to love strangers that are within their gates, it wasn't until the Lord Jesus Christ came on the scene that that agape love of God was
perfectly incarnated, perfectly manifest. He alone fully and completely exemplified brotherly love.

Now here's John's point in the New Testament context: if we are inhabited, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, if God lives in us by the Spirit, we are enabled to walk in the same love, to walk as He walked. So, to walk in truth means that we walk in love. Didn't Galatians 5:22 tell us: 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love'? Romans 5:5: 'The love of God', ought to be at least, 'shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us'. Now there's a great debate concerning biblical love - what is it? Well, some people say you can't command someone to love another, love is not something that you can command someone to do. Well, I take issue with that because here we find that John is actually reiterating a command of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we love one another. Now you would think today, when you hear couples that say: 'Oh, we have fallen out of love now', you would think it's something that you can't command. But I believe the problem around today, even in Christian circles, is that we have lost the real definition, biblically speaking, of what love is. When people say 'We have fallen out of love', what they mean is, without realising it, 'We've fallen out of infatuation', or perhaps 'We've fallen out of lust' - maybe it was lust brought them together in the beginning.

Here John says: 'Yes, this is a command we've had from the beginning, Jesus taught us to love one another'. Here's our problem, even as Christians: we think of love on an emotional level, we think of love as being a religious feeling that somehow supernaturally enables us to reach out and accept other people. Now let me say that emotion is part of love, and there is a strong emotional aspect even to the love of God, but essentially as love is defined in the Scriptures it is not emotional in its essence, it is an act of the will - an act of the will. It is to determine to treat other people the way that God treats you. Now I'm asking you tonight: do you do that? There's a lot of harsh treatment goes on among God's people, a lot of people who are deeply hurt because of the way they have been treated by so-called brothers and sisters in Christ. God commands us to love one another, to do it whatever problems we have about it, we've got to do it!

Now there are those even in the church who we're not naturally attracted to on a human level, maybe even people that we just don't like, things that we don't like about them - but the Bible teaches that we can love them! We can love them because God loved us when we were in sin, though He was angry with the wicked every day, He still showed His grace and love toward us. The reason why we can do it is because Christian love is not an affection, it is an attitude. It is manifest in our actions, not in our affections.

Now here's the test whether or not we love one another as Christians in the biblical sense: on what level do you react to other people? This is very practical - answer it: on what level do you react? Most people react on an emotional level, and we're all guilty of this. Something is said to you or something is done to you, and you feel hurt - and rightly so at times. We have all had this experience, but the problems come when we allow ourselves to react on an emotional level, and it is our emotions that dictate our actions. You see, what John is saying is that Christian love is where God's truth regulates our attitude, and that attitude regulated by God's truth determines our actions. I'll be honest with you: sometimes it is true, isn't it, that when people say certain things to us, and do certain things against us, even God's people, sometimes you feel like striking out! Sometimes you feel like saying things that you ought not to say - and our natural reaction is to hate, it is to spit, it is to insult, it is to turn our back! Yet Christ tells us to turn the other cheek, bless those that curse you, pray for those who despitefully use you. You say: 'Well, that just seems impossible', but here's the question: what do we incarnate, what do we manifest? Is it our emotions or is it Christ in our actions?
John is saying that when we manifest our own natural emotions it grieves the Lord, but when we manifest the love of God in obedience to Christ's commandment it brings joy to the heart of God.

I heard a story recently - it's years old - but it's about a prestigious church in the United States, some of you have probably been to it, a Baptist Church. They were appointing a new Assistant Pastor, and there was a great disagreement over who it should be, and the members meetings were very lively - skin and hair flying at times! One man was chosen and he was appointed, the day came for the induction service - and for the first time ever a church service in the States was televised, and it was this one. There was great excitement, this had never happened before - such a novelty. In the proceedings after the hymns, this pastor-elect stood to his feet, and one of his greatest opponents couldn't take it any more. He strode up to the podium, planted an uppercut on his chin in front of the whole of the audience who were watching it on air! What do you think that communicated to folk outside in the world? What did it say about the Lord's words: 'By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples'? It turns out that that young pastor's attitude made the difference, because that young pastor was a man called Charles Stanley who has become one of the greatest Bible teachers in the United States. It was his attitude to the action that made the difference.

John says that if we say that we love God and hate our brother, we are liars - but if we obey God and His commandments, His love is perfected in us and we have no problem loving our brother. Now here's the question: how does your walk measure up to your talk? We all agree with this stuff, but it's very difficult to manifest it. While a missionary was addressing a group, a woman in the audience rose and left it, walked out of the building, and then she came back a few minutes later and sat down again. After the lecture the missionary asked her if she had left because she'd lost interest, or didn't agree with something she'd said. She said: 'Oh no, you said many wonderful things, I simply went out to ask your driver if you lived by them. He said you did, so I came back in to listen!'. I believe that this is where there is a great blind spot in evangelical Christianity today in our witness to the world. They are not coming to listen because they're often not seeing walking in truth and love. Do you agree?

We don't love one another as we ought. There are things done and said on one another that should never ever be said or done. A chaplain exemplifies the positive of this. He was given over to the army to minister to them, and he was on the battlefield. He had a Bible under his arm, and he walked across the field and stooped where there were people needing ministry - those who were wounded and dying. He came to one man in particular who seemed to be in great need. He laid down his Bible on the ground beside him, he took off his coat and he made a pillow and rolled it up and put it under the man's head. Then he gave him the last drops of water that he had in his canteen, and finally he even ripped his own clothing up and made a bandage for this soldier's wounds. When he finished doing all that, the soldier said quietly to him: 'Now chaplain, if there's anything in that book you placed on the ground that made you do all those things for me, please read it to me'. He was walking in the truth. He was manifesting love. To walk in the truth, John says, means that you must walk in love - where is the love today in Christianity? Where is it? Where is it in our relationships with each other? Where is it in our relationships to the world? Do they know us as a people who love them? I don't think so.

Now the second sign and test that John gives us is in verse 6: 'And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it'. The apostle's second appeal is: to walk in truth is to walk in obedience, not just to walk in love but to walk in obedience. You see, what John is saying is
that it's not only doing the truth through love, but truth and love go together with obedience - they are inseparable, they're intrinsically linked. Let me say this: in our modern world and in our contemporary church, this idea of obedience is often seen as legalism. I don't know whether you've heard that or not. If you're in any shape or form concerned about doing what's in the word of God by jot and tittle, you're seen as a legalist. It's perceived, as well, to be the opposite of love. If you're all concerned about commands and obeying the word of God, well then: 'That's legalism, and legalism is the opposite of love, so I'd rather have love! God has a lot to say about love, and John has an awful lot to say about it, therefore legalism goes out the window' - and it always should go out the window, but I believe the contrast is a false one because obedience to God's word is not legalism.

Let me define this for you once and for all, if you're in a quandary about what it may be, and even if you're a legalist or not by other's accusation: legalism is an emphasis on the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. Now sometimes we are legalists in that definition. If you lose the spirit of the law you're a legalist, only adhering to the letter. But it is also the belief that salvation and favour with God is earned by the law, by pleasing God, obeying commands rather than through grace and faith. So legalism is an attempt to earn God's love by works. Now John is not teaching that for one minute - he, in fact, is teaching that Christians ought to obey God in Christ because they love Him, because they have experienced His love and that love is reciprocated in a loving obedience to His commands.

You see, if you love someone you delight to please them, and if you love Christ you'll keep His commandments. Did He not say those very words? Indeed in John 15:10 He said: 'If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love'. In 1 John chapter 5 we read these words: 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous'. You see, John is again saying that our walk without manifests the love within! If we love our brothers we'll walk toward them in an attitude of love, but equally so: if we love God, we will obey God's commandments.

How much you love the Lord is directly related to how much you obey His commands. You call that legalism, it is not, that is biblical Christianity and the disciple's life. The lie of the devil is that you can love Christ and live in your sin. I heard about a couple who were not married but were living in a sexual relationship, and they both said that they were Christians. They said to their pastor: 'We love each other and we really love God, and we know that God wants us to be together' - that cannot be! For His commands teach the opposite, and if we love Jesus we will keep His commandments. There's a great confusion: people saying on the one side that there is love, and on the other side there is law, and I know that's true in a sense - but never associate law with doing what is good in God's word, the principles of the New Testament, the commandments and precepts of our Lord Jesus Christ. If you love Him, you'll obey Him.

Someone has rightly said: 'Truth without love is oppression, but love without truth is sentimentality'. You see, John is saying that the grounds of our fellowship must be truth, that's the fundamental. That fellowship of truth will be manifest in two things, it will be manifest in our walk of love and our walk of obedience. Do we have it? It's like a three-legged stool: truth, love, obedience - take one away and the thing topples. Now we've got to get real here, because I know perhaps what you're thinking, and it's the same as me: which of us as Christians does not find it a continual struggle to walk constantly along the path of obedience? It's not easy, especially in the world in which we live. Why is it so hard? I mean, in the verse that we just read in 1 John 5:3, John says that the Saviour's commands are not grievous, they're not burdensome. His commands are not hard in that sense, and yet so often we struggle with them, we wrestle with them, we find it so hard to implement them.
Now, of course, some find these things easy because they don't live according to Christ's commandments, they live according to licence. They say they're saved by grace, and they just go and live as they please. That's not Christianity. Why do so many, like you I believe, that wish to live according to God's commands, you want to please the Lord, you want to do what He has laid down, you want to walk as He walked to bring joy to the heart of God - why do you find it so hard to be obedient? Well, I think perhaps that the main reason why people find that is a struggle is because they make this fatal mistake of separating obedience from love. They make obedience legalism, it is just an adherence to rules and regulations, and they divorce it from love: love to God, love to Christ, and it's not motivated from a passion in their heart but motivated by a sense of duty. Then eventually it becomes a grinding duty, and then a ritualistic keeping of regulations, and eventually you lose heart altogether and you give up the struggle.

Is that, perhaps, where some of you are this evening? I know there's discipline and let me say that some of the Christian disciplines...don't think for one minute that every time I get on my knees in my quiet time that my heart is just bursting out and flowing out of love to the Lord - far from it. Sometimes we have to break the flesh and buffet the body in a first reaction in order to allow the Lord to bring forth, by His Spirit, those blessings. It's not long, when you break through that fleshly barrier, till you get into that spiritual realm. It's not easy, but I'll tell you: it's impossible if you don't love Him, or if you lose your love for Him. Don't divorce love from obedience!

So, what's the answer? This is what we come back to again and again and again: we need to get back to our first love, the Lord Jesus! That's the answer, He is the answer to everything in the Christian life! It is to get a fresh love for Him, it's to focus our eyes again on Him and Him alone! It is to say, as we sang: 'Lord, it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint, and yet I love and adore - but O, for grace to love Thee more' - but the secret is realising the love that He has for us. In 1 John 4, we studied it in verse 19, John said: 'We love, because he first loved us'. You say: 'How can I learn to love the Lord more? How can I obey His commandments by loving Him more? Where can I get a greater capacity to love the Saviour?'. It's very simple, the only way you'll get it is by dwelling on His love for you: God's love in the word of God - being saturated and soaked in the Bible, soak yourself in seeing God's being, God's attributes, God's character as they are there, and especially the great love that the Father has for the Son, and the Father and Son have for all of us.

How do you get it? Go back to Calvary where God showed His love most accurately and clearly and graphically and descriptively in that sacrifice for sins forever, when He was made sin for us, and He bore in His own body our sin on the tree. See it there and remember, as Paul said in Galatians, that the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me. If that doesn't pour the love of God into your heart, I don't know what will! That is what Jude calls 'Keeping yourselves in the love of God' - do you do that? Do you keep yourself in the love of God?

Derek Jackman, the commentator, says this, and I quote: 'When the love of God is not a present reality to us, we need to take that medicine three times a day after meals until our spiritual appetite begins to pick up and we begin to respond in awe to God's overwhelming grace. We need to take some of our New Testament's great affirmations of the unfailing love, the limitless grace, and the keeping power of God; and read ourselves into them personally by name'. Like Romans 8:31-39: 'What can separate us from the love of God?'. Ephesians 1 and verse 3: 'We're blessed with all spiritual blessings, chosen in Christ', and so on and so forth. First Peter 1:3-9 - that we have an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for us. That is the medicine for the soul.
When was the last time you meditated on a verse like Jeremiah 31:3: 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee'? That's why the Lord Jesus, when He was asked Himself: 'Of all the commandments, Rabbi, which is the most important?', He responded 'The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these'.

Do you know what our problem is? We don't take the medicine. We don't take time, because these days we're so busy - but because we don't take time, do you know what happens? We get sick, we lose touch with the love of God, we lose touch with a love toward our brother, and we begin to get to an extent where we don't walk properly any more! Sure, many people think that reading through the Bible in a year is legalism and it's a huge task, when in theory all it takes to read through the Bible in a year daily is 15 to 20 minutes maximum. I vouch to say that you, with me, would consider a television programme 30 minutes long a short one. We're not taking the medicine. We fill our lives with rubbish, and then we neglect to keep ourselves in the love of God - and then we wonder why we're not walking as He walked.

John says: what a difference it makes when you live the truth, because when you live the truth you manifest the One who is the way, the truth and the life - and others around us would see Him! A brilliant preacher aimed his sermons at a godless intellectual who attended his services regularly. When the series of sermons were over, the sceptical sinner was converted. The preacher was ecstatic, he came to him and he said: 'Which one of my lectures brought conviction to you?'. His gratification disappeared with a chilling smile from the convert when he answered: 'My dear Sir, it was not through your lectures that I was converted, I slept through most of them. It was an old woman who used to hobble up the steps of your church, limping and leaning on her crutches, and between every thump of the crutch on the stone steps she exclaimed 'My blessed Jesus, my blessed Jesus'. He said: 'As I looked at the poor disabled woman, and saw the genuine content and peace on her face, and found out that she lived a consistent life in the face of poverty and loneliness' - listen to this - he said 'I saw a living book to which I could not reply, so I wanted the Christ whom she professed'.

John says we should be living books to which there is no reply, then people will long to know the Christ that we profess.

Lord, we want to thank You for Your love - but 'That I may love Thee too, O Lord, Almighty as Thou art; for Thou hast stooped to ask of me the love of my poor heart', is amazing. Lord, we have such reason to love You, and yet our love is so weak, so feeble - but we pray that more and more, we would keep ourselves in the love of God, and get a fresh glimpse of the Lord Jesus Christ, our Beloved. As we begin to love Him again more and more, may we manifest His love to others, our brothers and sisters and those who are lost. May we manifest an obedience to His commands, that others may look on us and see that we don't just know the truth and love it, but we live it - that others would look at us and see Jesus. In whose name we pray, Amen.
Second John, and we'll read it all together so that we get the flow of John's argument once more. Our title this evening is 'Handling Heresy'.

"The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth; and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth; For the truth's sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever. Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father. And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it. For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds. Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of thy elect sister greet thee. Amen".

Now two weeks ago we began our studies of 2nd John, looking in introduction at some answers to certain questions that we asked of this little epistle that is really comprised of only one page of papyrus, which is the ancient paper that the apostle John would have written on. Of course, the first question, if you weren't with us let me recap on these, the first was: who is writing the book? We saw that it is John the elder, we believe that to be John the apostle, the oldest surviving apostle who knew the Lord Jesus Christ in His physical person here on the earth. That is the same author as the Gospel of John, 1st John, 2nd John, 3rd John, and the Apocalypse, the book of the Revelation. Then we asked the question: to whom is this little letter written? We find the answer in the first verse, that it was written to an 'elect lady' who John knew in the truth - and at least I concluded, though some of you may disagree on this point, that this is indeed a real unknown Christian lady. I believe that the church, this particular church that John is writing to, met in her home and may have comprised of some of her actual family members - but nevertheless, the church met in her home, and thus the letter is addressed to her.

We asked thirdly what the motivation of the writing of this letter was, and we see very quickly in the reading of it that there was this tradition among the early church brethren of widespread itinerant ministry - that is, wandering evangelists, preachers and teachers. They would have gone from town to town, and taken hospitality in the home of the saints - but, of course, that hospitality was open to great exploitation by charlatans and false teachers who were wanting to sow seeds of heresy among God's children. So that brings us, fourthly, to answer the question of what the message is that's contained in this little epistle. It's simply
that this lady, and indeed the church that we believe inhabited her house, should know who these false teachers are, be able to recognise them, and know how to deal with them. Indeed we surmised, perhaps, that she actually had written, or at least sent embassage to the apostle John asking the question: 'How do I know whether one of these teachers coming to the church is genuine or not? How do we, as an assembly, recognise them?'.

Of course, the message is simple: those who are of the truth will know the truth, they will love the truth, and they will walk in the truth related to our Lord Jesus Christ. Whoever does not manifest those characteristics is to be refused fellowship, the apostle John says. So in our first study we looked in verses 1 to 3 at the objective truth concerning who Christ is. It's outlined for us there in the form of Christ as that incarnate One, the pre-existent Son of God who came into flesh at Bethlehem's manger, lived as the Christ of God among men, went as the Christ of God to Calvary, died as the Christ of God there, was buried and rose again the third day, and is ascended on high as Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son. In verse 3 we saw that the message, the objective message of truth is that this incarnate Son of God in Christ is the One who saves, and He saves by grace: 'Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love'.

Then the last week, two weeks ago before our May Day bank holiday, we looked in verse 4 following down to verse 6 at how John begins to write about subjective truth - not now the actual Christ in incarnation, or the message that Christ brought, but the incarnation of the truth of Christ in the life of the believer; how we in our walk, our personal experience of Christ Himself and His Gospel, are to manifest an incarnation of what Christ is. We saw that in a twofold manner in our last study, I hope you remember. Verse 5, the apostle's first appeal was that if we walk in truth, that will mean that we walk in love: 'And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another'. Then his second appeal was that if we walk in the truth, not only will we walk in love but, verse 6, we will walk in obedience: 'And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it'.

Now there was one more appeal from the apostle that we didn't have time to deal with, and it's found in verses 7 right through to verse 11, and in verses 12 to 13 we have the closing statement of John. We're going to look in a little bit of detail this evening at this third appeal. Here is how we know if we walk in the truth, and those who do walk in the truth: if we walk in the truth, John says, we will walk in sound doctrine. Of course, we saw that this little epistle reflects the three tests of how we know we're in fellowship with God and the assurance of salvation that we found in his first epistle. The social test, we love our brothers. The moral test, we obey God's commandments. The doctrinal test, we believe in the Christ that was sent, who came, who died, who was buried, who rose again, who is coming again, and who is encapsulated for us in the apostles' doctrine.

So verses 7 to 11 again bring us to the objective message of Christianity, that is: the actual incarnation of Jesus Christ. We took great length, as we went through the first epistle of John, to emphasise the point that Christianity is Christ - Christianity is Christ! Everything in the Christian faith relates to who Christ is, and the work Christ has accomplished. So any serious error or heresy that enters into Christianity normally relates to the doctrine concerning Christ, who He is and His work, what He has done.

So John comes with this third appeal: if you're walking in the truth, your doctrine will be sound regarding Christ. If you're going to walk in truth regarding your doctrine concerning
Christ, there are some things that you need to note. That's what he gives us in verse 7 right to verse 11, and I have three of them this evening. The first is: you need to realise the threat, verse 7. Then you need to recognise the error related to the doctrine of Christ. Then thirdly you need to react appropriately to such heresies and to such heretics who bring this false doctrine.

So let's deal with the first: if you're going to walk in truth regarding the doctrine of Christ, first of all verse 7 tells us you need to realise the threat. Look at verse 7: 'For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist'. First of all you need to waken up to the threat that there are many deceivers! There are many people, John says, who have entered into the world who have a wrong, erroneous, heretical doctrine concerning Christ and His work.

Let me say right away in preface to this point that many believers do not appreciate the doctrinal dangers that exist related to Christology, that is the doctrine of Christ and His work. Some people just simply assume, in a naive way, that if a person uses the same language that evangelical Christians use, and even if they claim to have the same experiences whatever they may be - whether it is conversion or some subsequent experience with the Holy Spirit - they assume naively and erroneously that they must be the same as we are. Now right away John is dismissing this completely. He is saying: 'Banish the thought! No! It doesn't matter what a man says, what a man claims, or what he has experienced: the test, the test is his doctrine regarding Christ!'

Now John reiterates this for us again in his second epistle, as he did in the first, in very strong terms. He wants us to realise the threat! If you don't realise the threat tonight, you've got to listen to John's language. He says: 'Anyone who does not have the correct doctrine concerning Jesus Christ is a deceiver and an antichrist'. Now let me say that that should better be translated: 'He is the deceiver, and the antichrist'. What John is really getting at is that the antichrist is the supreme enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of course he is animated by the devil himself. But 'anti' doesn't just mean 'against', it can also, as a prefix, mean 'in place of' - that is, this one will try to take the place of Christ. False teachers, John is saying, will bring you a Christ that is not the real Christ, he may look like the real Christ, he may at times sound like the real Christ, but there is an intrinsic difference: he is taking the place of Christ, which makes him the deceiver himself, the antichrist. If you like, an effigy of the devil. That's serious stuff, isn't it? Realise the threat!

Now look again at what he says, for he goes on to say in verse 7: 'many deceivers are entered into the world'. Now that could have a twofold meaning. It could mean that they are entered in, they have gone out in a missionary capacity. In other words, these false teachers have actually entered into the world in order to proselytise and evangelise souls to their erroneous doctrine. Of course, we know that that is the case, you see the plethora, the great explosion of false prophets, false cults, false religions in our world today - and the many people that will fall at the feet of those false gospels, and even dedicate their whole life to the very point of death for it. Often we feel ashamed at the zealousness of those who proliferate their falsehood in our world - but please don't make the mistake of thinking that because they are so zealous, and even at times so successful, that that in some way is an indication of the authenticity of their message. Far from it! Indeed, it is simply a fulfilment of what John says here: many are entered into the world with their false Christ, their false gospel.

It was Mark Twain, far from a theologian, who said: 'A lie runs around the world while truth is putting on her shoes'. That's often the case! Falsehood explodes on the scene, and people
often are so willing, more so, to accept it than they are the truth of the Gospel. Brigham Young University president Merrill Bateman predicted that - and he said this in the year 2000 - that by the year 2025 the number of Mormon missionaries will have more than doubled, rising to about 60,000 in the year 2000 to 125,000 in the year 2025 - 125,000 Mormon missionaries! Presently, as we speak, those missionaries are in 150 countries in our world. There's no doubt that Satan's emissaries are zealous in the preaching of their gospel.

But there's another sense in this phrase 'going out' that I think is the correct one. It's simply this: that these people have gone out of the church. We've had an indication of that already in chapter 2 of 1 John and verse 19, if you care to look back at it. John says of these false teachers there: 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us'. So why have they gone out? They have gone out because they cannot exist within the church among the saints, they can't go on teaching their error among those who believe in the truth. Now of course Paul warned the overseers in Ephesus of this very thing in Acts 20 and verse 30, saying: 'Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them'. By doing such they manifest the fact that they were not of them, they were not truly saved in the beginning - but please grasp the import of John's point: you need to realise the threat! Not only are there many false teachers and missionaries gone out into the world from various cults that did not find their origination in Christianity, but there are even those from your own very ranks who will go out from you and will teach this error concerning the Lord Jesus. You remember, if you were with us in our series concerning the cults and false religions that, almost to an organisation, the founders of many cults that are under the umbrella of those that worship Christ in some shape or form, or at least follow Christ, most of them came out of orthodox evangelical Protestant Christianity - a fulfilment of what both Paul said to the Ephesians elders, what John is saying here, and what the Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7: 'Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity'.

You might say: 'Why is this? Why are there are those from among the ranks of Christianity who follow a false doctrine concerning Christ?'. Second Peter 2 verse 2 gives us the answer, he says that many of these false teachers 'shall follow their', the Authorised says, 'pernicious ways' - that literally means 'their sensuality'. They are following a doctrine that appeals to their senses, not that which is revealed of God by His Holy Spirit. Now please grasp John's point, you need to realise the threat: this will come from within the church! Let me give you one example. He is a false prophet by the name of William Irvine. He professed faith in the Lord Jesus in 1895. He joined the Faith Mission, who we're all familiar with, in 1896. He was a strong leader among the Faith Mission. Indeed, we are led to believe from historical records that he was a dynamic preacher, and indeed he is supposed to have had great success in the evangelistic mission and Gospel crusades that were held around the whole of Ireland in many church halls, some of them you'll be familiar with - towns and villages around the rural countryside. All of a sudden William Irvine changed his tact, and he began denouncing all of the churches in Christianity. Then he moved himself completely away from all churches, denominations and affiliations in Christianity, and he set himself up as a special leader and teacher, and gathered a group of people around him who would later be called the 'Cooneyites' or the 'Two by Twos' - a false cult, having a false Christ, teaching a false gospel. Their Christ is false, for they're unclear whether He is God or not. Their gospel is false, they preach the 'Jesus way', that Jesus is our example and we ought to follow Him in good works to be saved. Now Jesus said 'By their fruits ye shall know them'. Eventually in 1920 Irvine
went to live in Jerusalem, for he believed that he was one of the two witnesses mentioned in Revelation chapter 11 prophetically. But the story goes, of course, that in 1947 William Irvine died - and 3½ days later he didn't rise again, like the witnesses will, but he lies still in the grave: testimony to the fact that he is and was a false prophet, and spawned a false cult called the 'Cooneyites'.

Now, if you take the measuring stick that many Christians do today to measure false doctrine, you would be saying right now: 'But this man professed faith in Christ! This man was a Christian! This man was one of us! This man fellowshipped with us! He was in the Faith Mission! He was a mighty instrument of God that was used to the salvation of many lost!' - it doesn't matter! God's word says that if you err concerning the doctrine and the work of Christ, it is tantamount proof that you are not a child of God. That's what John is saying: these false teachers that came into the early church, they looked, they sounded, they operated like Christian missionaries - sure they were knocking on Christian homes looking for hospitality, they even considered themselves to be Christian evangelists. But because they erred fundamentally concerning Christ, John says they are imposters, they are heretics, they are deceivers, they are antichrist.

Now if you look at verse 9, John gives us another indication of how you recognise those who have erred concerning the doctrine of Christ. He says: 'Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son'. Now the first part of verse 9 that says: 'Whosoever transgresseth', you will know that 'transgression' means 'to step over the line of God's law', to go too far. So that could be literally translated, and some translations render it like this: 'Anyone who goes too far', or even, 'runs on ahead, hath not God'. Now the verb 'runs ahead' in the Greek is the word 'proagon' (sp?), it is made up of two words - one means 'forward', and the other means 'to lead'. 'Proagon' is a word that we derive our English word 'progress' from. So, in a sense, you could read this part of the verse: 'Whoever progresses, and abides not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God'. Now I think that John's using the word, the sense 'progress', quite ironically - because these false teachers in the churches in John's day believed that they were showing progress, intellectual progress, charismatic progress. But John is saying: 'Whatever progress you're proclaiming, if you're not abiding in the doctrine of Christ, the Christ of God that was revealed, you don't have God at all'.

Now let me say right away that in one sense progress is always a good thing in the Christian faith. John has been espousing this, you need to walk, to walk in order to love your brethren, to walk in order to keep the commandments of God, and there should be a continual progress in our lives as we conform ourselves to the image of Christ and obey His word more and more. So the progress that we want to achieve is progress that changes us, isn't that right? But there's another progress, John says, that is devilishly detrimental to the church of Jesus Christ, and that is the progress that changes the faith once delivered unto the saints. Now the founders of confusing cults and false faiths usually see themselves as progressives, don't they? They are the enlightened ones, the Buddha is the enlightened one; they are advanced thinkers, they're ahead of their time, they're bringing a new revelation that is added onto the Scriptures - like the Athenians in the book of Acts, they are hearing and telling of nothing else but some new thing. So here's an indication that if you're revealing something new about Christ, His person and His work, that has never ever been revealed before - you're not abiding in the doctrine of Christ. That is progress that is cursed of God!

But you know it's not just among the ranks of the cults that this type of progressiveness is found, for progressiveness is popular in the academic sphere in the church of Jesus Christ.
Some of you may have heard of a man called C. H. Dodd. He was one of the more influential British theologians in the first half of the 20th century. He wrote a book on John's epistles entitled 'The Johanine Epistles'. On page 150 he wrote of the need to maintain loyalty to what he called 'the fundamental truths of the gospel'. Now all of us could say 'Amen' to that, couldn't we? But then he adds, and I quote him verbatim: 'It must, however, be admitted that the writer, that is John, has incautiously expressed himself in terms which might seem to stigmatise any kind of advance as disloyalty to the faith, and so to condemn Christian theology to sterility'. You see what he's saying: John has prohibited advance and progress in the evolution of our Christian theology so that we can't add any more to it, and therefore he has condemned Christian theology to sterility, it can no longer evolve. Dodd goes on: 'This extreme position has not, in fact, been taken by any of the great Christian communions, however strongly they have emphasised the necessity of maintaining the faith which has once and for all been delivered to the saints'. I would say that probably accounts for the doctrinal apostasy in the great Christian communions - because they have run ahead of the doctrine of Christ! They have run ahead of God's revelation!

One of the most important slogans of the Protestant Reformation was the Latin phrase: 'Ecclesia Semper Reformanda', which means 'The church is always reforming'. Now recently I was listening, you'll forgive me, to 'Talkback' on BBC Radio Ulster, and there was a clergyman - I can't remember what church he was from or his name, I wish I could - who used this principle of the Reformation as a grounds for liberalism. 'The church is always reforming, it's always advancing, it's always progressing, it's always evolving' - in other words, these theologians are like scientists, and they're coming closer and closer and closer to the truth. They're realising that old things that they believed once, well they're really wrong, and they're discovering new truths. I wonder is that what the Reformers meant when they said 'The church is always reforming'?

How do we grapple with this? You might say: 'What are you bringing all this stuff up for?'. Well, this is what you will be faced with if you study Religious Studies at school. This is what you'll be faced with if you listen to the radio. How do you counteract it? If the Reformers believed that the church is always reforming, and that's what gave us the Gospel, well then, why don't we believe it now? Let me point out two things for your instruction. The first is this: it is the case, though sometimes we don't portray this, that we don't know everything. We certainly don't know everything about everything, and Paul testifies to that in 1 Corinthians 13: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known' - and remember he was under the influence of divine inspiration. But although we do not know everything about everything, we have God's revelation on Christ His Son, and we have God's revelation concerning the salvation that is through Christ and Christ alone. Now that is sure. Oh, I know there are things we're not sure about, but God is explicit in this regard: 'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son'.

What did John say in his first epistle in the first three verses? 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ'. In other words, this isn't an evolution of doctrine, this is God's final
revelation of Himself in His Son, and that's the same thing as we have today: it is finished, it is complete in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here's the second thing that we need to note: true Christian reform is never, mark this difference, never an introduction of something new. True Christian reform is always a rediscovering of something true - there's a difference. Something old that was lost, rather than something new that was never heard of. Here's the mark of Christian reform: it always goes back to the Bible! That's what the reformers did. They didn't apply their new intellectual aptitude to God's word to interpret it according to the philosophies, the intellectual trends of the day - no! They went back to the book, back to the Greek, back to the Hebrew to see 'What saith the Scriptures'.

Truth does not evolve, the truth of the Bible does not need enlightenment from science, from philosophy, from the charisma of Pentecost charismaticism - but all we need is what is from the beginning: Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. John says, now look: anyone who goes too far, anyone who runs ahead and abides not in the doctrine of Christ - that literally means, look at it in verse 9, 'the teaching about Christ', or it can also mean 'the teaching of Christ' - does not have God. A progressive theology is regressive, do you know why? It goes back to Genesis 3 and verse 1, where the devil said: 'Yea, hath God said...?', it casts doubt on God's word.

Many don't realise what is at stake when challenged with false doctrine concerning Christ. Let me give you two things that are at stake according to John. Verse 9: if you don't abide in the doctrine of Christ, you have not God. Now this is serious stuff! Salvation is at stake! If you don't have the right Christ, you cannot be saved. I don't care what anyone says, that's what God's word says. If you abide not in the doctrine concerning Christ, you have not God. But of course he's writing to believers, and he's warning them to stay clear of this heresy. The false teachers that were propounding this obviously hadn't God, but he was worrying that those who had God would follow their false doctrine. So not only is salvation at stake for these false teachers, but reward is at stake for these believers. Look at verse 8: 'Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought'. Now when he says: 'Look to yourselves', what he is saying is simply 'Take heed'. It's what the Lord said in Mark 13: 'Jesus answering them began to say, Take heed lest any man deceive you'.

Our responsibility today is to take heed as God's people, because John is saying there are false teachers who will come, and they will offer you something that you do not have - but in reality what they're doing, by stealth, is taking away something that you already have. They're not only taking away your true understanding of Christ and His work, but potentially they're thieving your reward. Satan is a thief, isn't he? We should not be surprised that just as Lucifer is an angel of light, that these false teachers should come as angels of light as well; but neither should we be surprised when they offer us something, and when we receive it they take something away from us. What they take away is, John says, our reward. If we're truly saved we can never be lost, we believe that, but what John's talking about here, I think, is twofold. First of all he's talking about the work of the apostles and the church collectively. Look at verse 8: 'Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought', some put it 'which ye have wrought'. But Paul in Galatians 4, you remember, in verse 11 when he was speaking to the Galatian controversy, to those Judaisers who were telling the believers they had to obey the law and all the rites and rituals and legalism, he said: 'I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain'. 'I'm worried that all this time I've been labouring for you and preaching to you and teaching, that it has been a waste of time!'.

208
But there's a great responsibility here, I believe, that is inferred to overseers within the assembly. Hebrews 13:17 tells us that we are to: 'Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you'. Here's Paul realising: 'One day I'm going to have to give account for the church, and I don't want to have wasted my time! So I want to guard the church from false doctrine, and wolves that will come in unawares'. Overseer, that's a great responsibility, isn't it? That's why we need to be on our guard against error, because we'll have to answer for it. It's not only collective loss, I believe it's individual loss. In Matthew 25 and verse 21 in the parable of the talents: 'His lord said unto [the servant], Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord'. The principle there is that faithfulness will accrue reward, but unfaithfulness will result in loss. In John's context, he is saying: 'Listen! You need to realise the threat here! You need to realise that if you're gullible, that is tantamount to being unfaithful, and unfaithfulness will result in loss of reward'.

Now he's not talking to these false teachers any more, he's talking to the believers, and he's saying: 'Do you see if you think that this false doctrine concerning Christ and His work doesn't really matter that much? And you don't love the truth enough to stand for the truth, and walk in the truth, and be a living personification of the truth? You will lose reward!'. Paul said: 'Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire'. What is John meaning? He is meaning that a Christian who is soft on heresy will lose something, they'll lose something. If you don't watch out, John says, you'll lose it. Realise the threat, that's the first thing that is necessary to walk in truth regarding the doctrine of Christ. The second thing is: recognise the error. It's found in verse 7 - bear with me, my voice is going, but I'll hammer on if you can listen! Recognise the error, and the error is, verse 7: 'For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh'. Recognise the error, first of all, as a denial of the incarnation. Now watch what it says, it doesn't say that Jesus came in the flesh - no, it says 'Jesus Christ'. Now that's important, because 'Jesus' is the name that Christ was given at His birth and it speaks of His humanity, it speaks of His Saviourhood, it means 'Jehovah saves'. So this is speaking of the fact that this Man would come to save humanity, on behalf of humanity, as a human being - but it wasn't just Jesus who came in the flesh, it was Jesus Christ! Now 'Christ', 'Christos', means 'anointed', it means 'Messiah', it means the divine Saviour of God. So what John is saying is that the Man Jesus is the Christ of God, and then he goes on to say that you've got to believe that Jesus Christ is, in the flesh. Now that in the Greek is literally a present participle, which means that Christ is coming in the flesh. What does that mean? It means this: that the Christ Jesus who came, is the Christ Jesus who lived, who died, who was buried, rose again, and the same Jesus Christ is coming.

Now what is the point of all that emphasis? Simply because this man Cerinthus, and his descendants who would become the Docetists and the Gnostics, they were teaching that the Man Jesus lived as you or I from His birth until His baptism, and then at His baptism the Christ-Spirit, the Word, Logos principle descended and sort of overshadowed Him; and then before the cross it disappeared again so that the man that died was not the Christ, the Son of God, and He never rose again. That's why he emphasises that it is this same Jesus that lived who is the same Jesus who will come again in like manner as you have seen Him go. It is
what Paul emphasises in Colossians 2 verse 9: 'For in him all the fulness of deity dwells in bodily form’ - in Jesus, Jesus Christ! John Stott puts it well when he says: 'The two natures, manhood and Godhood, were united already at His birth, never to be divided'.

Luke 2 verse 11 says: 'For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is'...Jesus the Lord? No. 'Christ the Lord'! Luke 1:35: 'The angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God'. Recognise the error - what is it? To deny the incarnation of Jesus Christ, to deny that the pre-existent Son of God came in human flesh.

Secondly: recognise the error of the denial of the Trinity. Verse 9: 'Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son'. So John says that it's necessary to be right about the Son if you're going to be right about the Father. In 1 John 2 he said the same thing in verse 23: 'Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also'. You might say: 'Well, I know folk who believe in the Son of God, but they don't believe the Trinity'. Do they believe the Son of God's doctrine as the doctrine that is here in the word of God, as once and for all delivered to the saints? Have they abided in it or have they added to it? This Christ is a Son, and this Son has a Father. Robert Govett put it better than I could when he said: 'All who are ignorant of, or hostile to the doctrine of the Trinity are ignorant of God, and entangled in Satan's meshes'.

Recognise the error: it is a denial of the incarnation, it is a denial of the Trinity. Then thirdly and finally: react appropriately. John says that if we walk in truth we should not give any cooperation whatever to a person spreading error regarding the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here's how he says we ought to react appropriately, verse 10: 'If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house' - do not receive them! Now what does that mean? Some have said: 'Well, it means don't receive unbelievers, don't have anything to do, become exclusive, with unbelievers'. Others say: 'Well, it's believers who don't agree with your particular doctrine, secondary issues. Don't have anything to do with them if they don't agree with you on prophecy, or they don't agree with you on certain other issues, don't have anything to do with them'. Some think perhaps it's not agreeing with the cultists who come to your door, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, don't even let them through the door. Others think it's a licence to be rude to them and tell them to take themselves off, because you're not to bid them God speed - is that what it means?

Let me say categorically that it's got nothing to do with mere unbelievers. We are to win the lost, we are to save them from the fire. It's got primarily to do with those who are propagating a false doctrine regarding the Lord Jesus Christ. It's got nothing to do with doctrines that are not fundamentals, though we hold many doctrines that are important. Whilst there ought to be caution when inviting people into your home from the cults, and you need to be very careful if you ever engage in conversation with them, especially young converts, it's very unlikely that that's what John was meaning - because I'm quite sure that these false teachers were not going from door to door in a district, but they were going primarily to the doors of believers seeking hospitality. Let me say that you don't have a licence in this verse to be ignorant to anybody. I know you can be stern and rebuke someone sharply, but God's word tells us in Colossians 4 and verse 6: 'Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man'.
What is the key to understanding this not receiving? I believe it's this: for this woman to receive these false teachers into her home was tantamount to receiving them into the church, because her home was the home of the church. The only grounds, John is saying, for Christian fellowship is truth - but what he's also saying to us is that love has limits. He's saying: 'Don't throw caution to the wind, inviting anyone into your house or into the church because they claim that they're a servant of God'. Paul says in Philippians 1 verse 9: 'This I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in real knowledge and all discernment' - love is to abound in knowledge and in discernment!

Some people think: 'Well, if you love everybody, you've just got to accept everybody'. I think Howard Marshall gets the meaning of this verse well when he says: 'The real point is this: there's a difference between giving a person love and even hospitality, and providing him with a base'. That's what these early Christians would have been doing if they had opened up their home to them, they would have been providing them with a base to proliferate their false doctrine in that home which was a church, and further afield. So it leads on to the end of verse 10 and verse 11, where he says: 'neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds'. So he's saying that to tolerate error in that manner, to open up the church to it, which was your home, to tolerate that error is to share in the error. In Romans 1:32 Paul said: 'Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them' - well, it's the same thing regarding false doctrine. You mightn't believe it, but if you have pleasure in those that do believe it, you're guilty of that sin.

1995 was declared the 'Year of Tolerance'. A lot of Christians believe that tolerance is the highest Christian virtue, maybe the only Christian virtue, but the Bible places truth above any supposed virtues of tolerance. Yes, it is truth in love; yes, it is truth in grace; but love never compromises the truth. John Stott believes that this is referring, perhaps, from blessing them to an official visit of a false prophet to the church, or extending them an official welcome, rather than mere private hospitality. That may or may not be the case, one thing is sure: it's not a licence to stop evangelising people, or even folk in the cults, far from it. It is a warning shot not to bless them, or not to bless their works; because Christians are given an admonition to open their homes to unbelievers. Some have entertained angels unawares when they have entertained strangers, isn't that what the Scripture says? Look at 3rd John for a moment, verse 5: 'Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth'. You see this was encouraged, if you receive these true prophets you're a fellowhelper with them; but here's the contrast John is giving in verse 11 of 2 John: if you receive these false prophets, you're party to their evil deed.

So the principal here, I believe, is that nothing should be done to give the impression that offence to Jesus Christ and the doctrine of His grace has no consequences. If that is ever propounded from this pulpit, or any evangelical pulpit, it's finished. Christ is Christianity, Christ is everything, and John is saying you should never encourage false teachers in any way. Listen to what Chuck Swindoll says about it - someone might say 'That's not very loving' - Swindoll says: 'Love is the hinge on which hospitality turns to open its door, but just as a door has hinges it also has a lock. Love never opens a locked door to a wolf, even if it is dressed in sheep's clothing'. You see, that wouldn't be love! It wouldn't be love to God's people, because you're undermining their faith. It wouldn't be love to the false teacher,
because you're confirming him in his error, you're giving him some credibility by offering fellowship to him. It wouldn't be love to God - how could it be love to God to actively encourage the spread of that which is destructive to His truth and the testimony of His Son?

I know these words are harsh, but perhaps our problem, as James Montgomery Boice puts it, is this: 'If the words still seem harsh, it can only be that John's concern for Christ and His glory is greater than ours, and that our so-called tolerance is in reality just an indifference to truth, and a misunderstanding of true love'. True love is not embracing false teachers concerning the person and the work of Christ, that's not Christian love. I'm not saying you hate them, no; I'm not saying you're rude to them, no; but you don't offer them fellowship, that's for sure - for it's not loving the church, it's not loving them, it's not loving God. Here's another thing: it's not loving yourself.

John closes this epistle by saying in verse 12: 'Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of thy elect sister greet thee. Amen'. 'Face-to-face', literally means 'mouth-to-mouth'. He was looking forward to when he didn't have to write to them, but he could speak to them, if you like, we could say 'eyeball to eyeball'. I just wonder was John thinking of the joy that it would be to see the Saviour face-to-face, to see the Saviour and to know that you've ended faithfully, you've kept the faith unto the end? You remember the apostle Paul on one occasion in his pilgrimage could say: 'No man stood with me', and sometimes that's the way we feel when we hold to truth in these days, the truth regarding the person and the work of Christ. We feel that we're all wronged, everybody else is progressing, rejecting these doctrines for other new things - but John says: 'Live for the day when you'll see Christ face-to-face'. It doesn't matter how you feel now, live for that day.

I heard a story about a missionary who in the early years of the last century, because of broken health, left a lifetime of service in Africa and he happened to be travelling home to the United States on the same boat as the President Teddy Roosevelt. Arriving home, he arrived home at the same dock where everyone was gathered to greet the President who was coming home from a hunting trip on safari in Africa. There was the big crowd, New York city it was, all on the pier to greet the President - the bands played and thousands cheered. The missionary, though he was a little excited to be part of the celebrations, deep down in his soul he felt a little bit lonely because there wasn't one soul to greet him. He went alone to a little hotel room on the east side of New York, and he began - a bit like old Elijah - to complain to the Lord: 'Lord, I served You faithfully all those years out on the mission field, and no one met me when I came home'. Then it was as if he heard a voice saying to him: 'Ah, but you're not home yet, you're not home yet'.

'Take heed', John says, 'that you lose not your reward'. Peter says: 'For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you always in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth' - present truth. Do you love your brother? Do you walk in His commands? Have you kept the faith once delivered to the saints?

Next week, God willing, we'll start 3rd John.

O Father, help us not just to sing it, or just to wish it, but help us now to realise it, to actually put into Your mouth, Lord Jesus, the judgment that You'll pronounce upon us by the lives that we live now. That we would judge ourselves, that we would not be judged. Lord, help us to
always not only love our brother and obey Your commandments, but keep the doctrine pure concerning our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Saviour and Lord and God. In whose name we pray, Amen.
Turn with me to 3 John please, and we'll read all of this little book together as we will do each night. Verse 1: "The elder unto the wellbeloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth. For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth. I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God. Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true. I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee: But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name". Amen.

Now 3 John is unique in the canon of Scripture, as it is the shortest book in the New Testament, it is just one line shorter than the second epistle of John - that is, in the original Greek language. Yet, perhaps no other book in the New Testament paints for us a more vivid picture of first century early church life than 3 John does. It's as if we're a fly on the wall, witnessing some of the circumstances going on in this very early church. Now, it's very similar to 2 John, 2 John's keywords were 'love' and 'truth', and we find that the same keywords are in 3 John. But there is a significant difference midst all the similarities between 2nd and 3rd John, and it's simply this: you will remember that 2 John was addressed to an 'elect lady', John was writing to her warning that she should not admit false teachers into her home, which effectively was admitting them into the church fellowship. So she was warned, she was given a critique whereby she might know whether a teacher was true or false. Now 3 John is like a mirror image of 2 John in that it's opposite in the sense that John is writing to a man called Gaius, and Gaius is being commended for the very fact that he has admitted teachers into the church of Jesus Christ where he resided. Rather than a prohibition given by the apostle to Gaius, there is in fact a commendation and a warning that he should never refuse admittance to those who are the true teachers and preachers in the church.

So, if you like, these two epistles give us the two sides of love. In 2 John we have the firmness of love, that love does not open its doors to every thing and every thought. There has to be a protectiveness towards the church in love, towards the sheep, that the wolves do not get in and devour. Yet in 3 John we have this tenderness of love, that those who are truly in Christ, those who are in the fellowship of the Gospel ought to be given admittance, hospitality, among the people of God.
As we have read this book together, and as we will study it - that is 3 John - we will find ourselves, I think, saying: 'Well, times haven't changed much in 2000 years or so. We still have the same problems, and we still have the same types of people in the assembly'. I want you to imagine the scene which is the backdrop to 3 John. It's probably a house church located some distance from John's primary ministry, hence he has to write a letter. This little church is in the same theological struggle as the church that John wrote to in 1 John and 2 John. Now we know, by inference, that John once wrote to this church already - but an influential man within the assembly, probably a leader, an elder who had taken a primary position among other elders by the name of Diotrephes, rejected John's letter entirely. Verse 9 shows us this: 'I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not'.

Now after Diotrephes refused this first letter from John, the apostle sent emissaries to the church - but again Diotrephes stepped forward and refused them admittance, refused even to acknowledge them as children of God and servants of God. Verse 10 shows us this: 'Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church'. In fact, we know from verse 9 that Diotrephes even repudiated John the great apostle publicly. He spread rumours, verse 10 also infers, concerning the apostle's character. In fact, Diotrephes forcefully stopped any who were sympathetic to the apostle John and his brethren, anyone who gave fellowship and communion to them within the assembly, they were under the threat of excommunication. In effect what he was saying was: 'Anyone who sides with these men coming from the apostle John can get out of the church, just as I have thrown them out of the church'.

But there was one in the assembly, a courageous man, a gracious man, who accepted these missionaries as their host into his home, and his name was Gaius. Of course, he obviously knew Diotrephes, he knew the type of man that he was, he knew the venomous threats that he was making to any who accepted John or his friends, and yet he was not intimidated by him. We could say he feared God rather than men, and he helped these missionaries, he cared for them, he helped them on their way even financially. When the news returned to the apostle John first of all of Diotrephes' rebellion, and also secondly of Gaius' faithfulness, John then penned this short letter, his third epistle. In it he commends Gaius. Eventually he's going to visit the church, he tells us in his closing remarks, verses 13 and 14, and I just think perhaps that he wants an ally when he comes in Gaius, so that he can face Diotrephes with someone in the church who is of the same mind and the same heart as the apostle.

Let me just say that there's an interesting lesson there, I think, for leaders and elders within the church of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we spend so much time struggling with the problem people in the assembly that we forget to commend and encourage the faithful. The fact of the matter is: John didn't make that mistake. The first thing he does in this epistle is to commend Gaius for his faithfulness; and he is not a fool, because he knows that through his encouragement he is making an investment, for when he comes to face Diotrephes he will have the moral support of this faithful one, Gaius.

Now Gaius is one of four characters that we will face in 3 John. Gaius is 'The Man', I have entitled this study tonight, 'Who Helped God's Work'. He is a hospitable character, a friend to the workers in the Gospel, he is a spiritual man. Next week, in the will of the Lord, we will encounter 'Diotrephes, The Man Who Hindered God's Work' - self-seeking, unloving, self-promoting, and proud. Then, God willing, in our final study we will face Demetrius, he is 'The Man Who Is Honoured In God's Work' - set forth as a commendable example to all children of
God in his faithful service to the Lord. We believe he is the man who took this letter to this particular church. But if there's a message in this little epistle, it's this, and it's one we often hear reiterated in all sorts of circles today: where there are people there are problems. The church is not exempt, it never has been. Sometimes we hear ministry that we need to get back to the practices of the early church, and I would agree with that in one sense - but, you know, the early church has many problems, many more than we do today. There were people in the church, and they were problem people.

The question we need to ask tonight, as we seek to perhaps fit ourselves into the caricature of whether we are a Gaius, a Diotrephes, or a Demetrius is: am I a person who is a problem? Am I part of the problem, or am I part of the solution to the problem? So let us embark upon this epistle with that question on our minds personally: am I part of the problem, or am I part of the solution?

Now this little epistle begins, as all epistles, with a salutation. We know it's from John the elder again, and if you want to know why we believe that that is John the apostle, the last surviving apostle who was with the Lord Jesus in His earthly ministry, I would encourage you to get our introduction to the second epistle - I'm not going to go over that old ground regarding the authorship. This epistle is addressed clearly to this man Gaius. Now, there are several Gaius' named in the New Testament. There is Gaius of Macedonia who, together with Aristarchus, was seized by the rioting mob at Ephesus - we read of him in Acts 19. Then there was another Gaius who accompanied Paul the apostle on his last trip to Jerusalem. He formed part of the group of delegates that presented the offering from the Gentile churches to the church in Judaea. We read of him in Acts chapter 20. Then there is Gaius, another, of Corinth, in whose house we believe Paul the apostle lived while he was dictating the epistle to the Romans. You can read about that in Romans 16:23.

Now the big question is: is this Gaius the same Gaius? The answer is: we don't know, and there's no way of knowing. Gaius, we're led to believe, was probably the most popular name in the whole of the Roman Empire - it's a bit like James or John today - so we can never be sure who this man is. The fact of the matter is, even if we don't know anything more about Gaius than what we know in the third epistle of John, we learn a great deal about his character in these verses alone. We learn first of all that he was a well-beloved believer in the church and of John. You see that right away, 'wellbeloved Gaius', verse 1. He is well beloved, we shall see, because his whole life commended him to these fellow believers, his whole life was a witness to the love, the grace, and the life of God in Jesus Christ.

'Love' and 'truth' are not the only keywords in this epistle, another is the word 'witness'. It's found in verse 3, it's expressed in the word 'testified'; then in verse 6 we have the word 'report'; and in verse 12 we have the word 'bear record' and 'record'. Right away we are impressed with the fact that this man Gaius, Gaius the man who helped God's work, was a tremendous witness and testimony to love and to truth, these two great themes in John's epistle. The emphasis, I believe, is that whilst John has been concentrating on a great amount of doctrinal material regarding Christology and the doctrine concerning the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, he wants us to grasp this truth that the fight against falsehood is not fought alone by our words, but the fight against falsehood must be fought on the battleground of our lives. To others in our world, truth is not essential. Some believe, and you've heard them say it, so long as the deeds that you do are good, and you do them, that's all that matters - it doesn't really matter what you believe. Then there are others and they only believe that it's important to believe what's right, and after that it doesn't really matter what you do or how you do it. John right away is obliterating both of those fallacies, and showing us that truth and
life must be always married together, they are inseparables. Every Christian life must be a witness of the truth. Truth is not some just objective thing that is intangible, but truth must be enshrined within the life - and every Christian, like Gaius, is a witness. The big question is whether you're a good one or a bad one. Whether, like Gaius, you're helping the truth, or you're hindering the truth.

Gaius was a man, as we see from verse 8, who helped it: 'We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth'. Is that not what the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of in all of His ministry here on the earth? A case in point is the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 5 and verse 16: 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven'. The whole point of our residing here on earth as children of God is for witness, for record, for testimony of love and truth. Now, we need to ask the question of this man Gaius: what kind of characteristics do we find in a man who is walking in truth? We've been talking about this already in 2 John, but now we're given personification, an example of a man who is walking in truth - what are the salient characteristics that we see in this man?

Here's the first thing that I want you to notice: he was spiritually healthy, spiritually healthy. Verse 2, John says, and we're still in the salutation: 'Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth'. Now, it is customary in first century letters to begin them with a prayer, and John is keeping to the custom but he's Christianising it in a sense. What John is saying here is that he wishes that Gaius' physical health would correspond to his spiritual vigour, his spiritual health. He says: 'that he might prosper in all things', that is his physical well-being - not as the health and wealth prosperity gospel movement teaches us, that you should be a millionaire and never be sick - rather he clarifies it for us and says: 'that you might prosper and be in health'. John is saying: 'I long that your health would mirror your spiritual wealth'.

I was just thinking as I was studying this today, it's just as well John wasn't praying this prayer for many of us - for if the Lord granted it, some of you would be dead, some of you would be up in hospital! Most of us, I'm sure, would have an ailment of one kind or another. I wonder if we were to be asked the question: 'Would we like our physical condition to correspond to our spiritual condition?', how we would answer? The sad fact of the matter is, we often take better care of our physical well-being, our bodies, than we do of our souls. I'll not just ask the ladies the question: how long did it take you getting ready for the meeting tonight? Looking at some of you, it didn't take too long mind you! Then ask the question: how long did it take you talking to the Lord this morning? How long will it take you talking to Him this evening? It's a lesson, isn't it?

Just as an aside on this point, this flatly contradicts what is often taught by so-called 'faith healers'. Let me say that I believe that God can heal, I'm not one of these people that believes that God's healing is finished today, but many so-called 'faith healers' believe and teach that all sickness is as a result of specific sin in your life. Then, if they try to heal you and you're not healed, they tell you: 'Well, you've a lack of faith, that's why God hasn't worked in this regard'. Now Gaius' example flatly denies this, because here is a man whose spiritual condition was exemplary, whilst his physical condition was abysmal. It doesn't follow, and we must never make the mistake as Christians to assume that a person's illness or physical condition reflects something that is sinful in their life. Now sometimes it does, 1 Corinthians 11 tells us that, that many were weak and sickly among them because of their sin, getting drunk and feeding themselves around the Lord's Table - it was a judgment from
God. But let me remind you that only God was able to make that call, only God could diagnose that that was the reason for their illness, and you certainly can't do it, nor can I.

But note also that at the same time the apostle John in this salutation is expressing a prayer that Gaius would be well. We ought to pray that folk should be well, and I think this is the lesson that John's trying to bring to us here: the Christian ought to be concerned with the whole person. God is concerned with the whole person, God has redeemed us body, soul and spirit. God will resurrect us one day, bring us into the eternal state body, soul and spirit. Remember now the backdrop theologically to these epistles, John has already told us that it is the deceiver and the antichrist who claims that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh, because they believe all flesh is wrong - dualism, the material, physical world is evil, and only the spiritual is good and pure. John says: 'No', and that's why he was praying for Gaius' physical condition.

Here's his point: spiritual health will manifest itself in good symptoms, and the good symptom of spiritual health is witness for Jesus Christ. Verse 3: 'For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth'. He said the same thing of those in the elect lady's house in verse 4 of his second epistle: 'I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father'. Now it's tremendous to be a Christian and have the truth in you, but what John is saying is: it's better to manifest that truth in our lives, to exhibit it, to be a testimony, a witness, a record of truth. We should be people that don't just hold the truth, whether it's the Bible in our hand or doctrine in our head or even in our heart, but we should be a people by whom the truth is held, and who are held by the truth.

Someone has well said: 'Men would rather see a sermon than hear a sermon'. Now I know some of you might have watched that program 'You Are What You Eat', I confess to you I have never ever seen it before, but I've heard a little bit about it. Of course, that's a saying that's been going around for years. Dieticians tell us that if you eat too much garlic, you'll smell of it, and it comes out of your pores. I don't know that if you eat steak you'll become like a steak, I'm not sure, or if you eat chicken you'll become a chicken - but nevertheless, there is an element that when we digest our food, it becomes assimilated into our system. When we drink water it becomes blood, and it's the same in our spiritual lives. If we are to be strong spiritually, if we're to be a witness, if we're to manifest the power of God and energy in a spiritual sense to others, we need to digest spiritual things. Digestion in the spiritual life is meditation, meditation on God's word and God's truth - not just reading it, not just studying it, but inwardly digesting it is what digestion is to the physical life. It's not enough to hear God's word - you need to hear it. It's not enough to read it - you need to read it. It's not enough to study it - you need to study it; but you need to meditate upon it to digest it! So much so that Paul could say: 'Though the outward man perish, the inward man can be renewed day by day', if you meditate upon God's word. Meditation, digestion makes God's word part of the inner man.

That's what Gaius was: he was a walking Bible. D. L. Moody would have called him 'The truth translated into shoe leather'. William MacDonald, the commentator, said very profoundly: 'There's nothing that counts more for God in an age of fact', and I think what he means by that is a rationalistic age, 'nothing counts for more in this age than a holy life'. Gaius is what I would call a 'glasshouse Christian', transparent. What you see is what you get. He's the real thing. It's important to John that he knows that about Gaius. We believe, perhaps, he led him to the Lord Jesus Christ, and that's why he could say in verse 4: 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth' - no greater joy! Have you ever heard it said by an
evangelist or preacher, maybe I have even said it myself, 'There's nothing like leading a soul to Christ'? There's no greater joy on this earth than pointing a soul to the Saviour. But you know, there's no greater heartache than to have pointed someone to the Lord Jesus Christ, and then see them return, after profession of faith, to their former life, and go back to the mire like a pig and wallow in the dirt, or go back like a dog to its own vomit. The greatest thrill is not pointing a person to Christ, the greatest thrill and joy is to lead a person to Jesus and then see them going on with the Lord. That was John's joy.

That's why we need to emphasise follow-up in our evangelism - not just getting people saved, but discipling them and getting them mature in the faith. Here is a man, Gaius, who is spiritually healthy - are you, my friend? That is a person who's walking in the truth, that is a person who's a witness.

The second thing that we see about him is not only that he was spiritually healthy, but he was openly hospitable. Now, I think I told you already that in these days the ministry in the local church was an itinerant ministry, and the pastors and evangelists, and teachers and preachers would travel around and visit the churches, and stay in the homes of the believers. Preachers weren't wealthy, and they couldn't afford to stay in inns - and they wouldn't have wanted to because of the debauchery that was going on in inns of that day - and so the believers, the saints of God put them up. Here is a man who exemplifies hospitality in the early church. It was a delight to him, a special privilege to throw open his doors, the doors of his home, to preachers and teachers of the Gospel. It's tremendous when we see this - in verse 5 not only did he open his home to the brethren, it says, but to strangers. Some versions put it like this: 'And especially to strangers'.

He was openly hospitable. I'm not so sure if you're familiar with this, but the New Testament presents hospitality as a very important ministry in God's sight. Elders, the Bible teaches that bishops are to be hospitable, 1 Timothy 3 verse 2, Titus chapter 1 and verse 8. In Romans 12 we read that if a widow is hospitable to others she is to be honoured by the church. Do we practice this today? In 1 Peter 4 and verse 9, we read that we are to offer hospitality without grumbling, without murmuring. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to be hospitable because some have entertained angels unawares, they have unwittingly entertained angels because they have flung open their doors to strangers! The New Testament is full of the exhortation to hospitality.

But let me show you the primary reason why we ought to be hospitable as Christians. Turn with me to Matthew's gospel chapter 25, and there is a judgment here being described but the principle refers to many things. Verse 40 of Matthew 25: 'And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me'. What does that mean? It means this: that when you engage in open hospitality to brethren and servants of Christ, you care for them as if you were caring for the Lord Jesus Christ Himself! On the other hand, failure to care for the Lord's servants is looked upon as failure to care for the Lord Himself in verse 45 of the same chapter: 'Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me'. There is a blessing from the Lord when you are openly hospitable, because you're not just ministering to the servants of Christ and to the brethren in Christ that you have, you're ministering to the Lord Himself!

Now turn with me to another portion, Luke's gospel chapter 24, where we have an actual illustration of this fact literally. Luke 24, the two on the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ and His resurrection, unknown to them. They are despondent,
desolate, thinking all hope is gone, and in verse 29 we read that after the Lord Jesus appeared to them, not knowing who He was, and after He began at Moses and all the prophets expounding unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself: 'They constrained him', verse 29, 'saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them'. They were hospitable, they opened their home unwittingly to the Lord Jesus Christ. 'And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures. And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, Saying, The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon. And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread'.

What a wonderful story! Opening their home in hospitality, and opening their home unwittingly to the Lord Himself! William MacDonald says this of that very instance: 'Many can testify that through the practice of hospitality meals have been turned into sacraments, children have been converted, and families have been drawn closer to the Lord'. Do you practise hospitality? Elders, do you practise it? Deacons, do you practise it? Members, do you practise it? I'll have to be honest, sometimes we're in an awful predicament when we invite visiting preachers over to the province because we haven't got anybody, but one or two, to put them up. Those one or two are overburdened continually because the rest aren't willing - that's hospitality. Do you do it?

Not only do you do it, but do you see a blessing in it? W. A. Criswell is arguably one of the greatest Southern Baptist preachers that this generation has known, he's now deceased recently. He tells the story that it was actually through his parents' ministry of hospitality that he was converted. When he was 10 years of age a preacher came to their church to hold an evangelistic crusade, and his mother, Anna Criswell, invited him to make his lodgings with them during the two week stay. The young W. A. Criswell was greatly impressed by this visiting evangelist by the name of John Hicks. When he was out for a walk little W. A. would go and walk alongside him, and when he was going to church he would go to church with him, he would return home with him. When he was in the home, during their meals the boy would pull up a chair close to the preacher and listen to the adult conversation over the meal. Mr Hicks stopped and took time with the little boy, he talked about his thoughts with him, he asked him questions, he asked about his aspirations for the future, what he would do when he was older. By the time Mr Hicks left the town, W. A. Criswell had received Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord.

Don't underestimate hospitality. There is a Danish proverb that says: 'Where there is room in the heart, there is room in the house'. Hospitality isn't just putting a meal down to someone, it isn't just inviting someone back for supper, hospitality is opening your heart to others. When your heart is open to them, your home is open and everything is open. Even when we are hospitable, do we open our hearts to others? Someone has said: 'Hospitality is the art of making people feel at home when you wish that they were at home'. I heard about a man today who took his dog to the vet, and asked him to cut off his tail completely. The vet says: 'I'm not sure I could do that! Why on earth would you ever want to do that to your dog?'. 'Well', said the dog owner, 'My mother-in-law is coming to visit us, and I don't want anything in the house to suggest that she's welcome'. That's often the way our hospitality is, isn't it? It's tongue in cheek, we do it reluctantly, it's not with an open heart.
Gaius not only opened his home, he opened his heart - do you know something? When you open your heart like Gaius, you'll open your hand. You see, he was not just spiritually healthy and openly hospitable, but we find out about this man that he was evangelically generous, evangelically generous. Look at verse 6: [These brethren] have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well'. Charity, love! He was generous to all the church, all these ministers, all these brethren, these evangelists, these preachers and teachers who came - even strangers, he didn't know some of them! He knew they were the Lord's, that's what mattered - but how generous he was! It was reported right throughout the whole church as a testimony to the love of Christ - and because of that, please don't miss this: his name 'Gaius' is ever enshrined in holy writ because he not only had an open home and open heart, but he had an open hand. He was evangelically generous.

John not only commends him, but he encourages him to continue in the same. He says: 'send them forward on their journey', verse 6. Now what that literally means is: 'Assist them on their journey', not just a friendly 'Goodbye, the Lord bless you and keep you, and make His face shine upon you, but I'm not giving anything to you!' - no. It was material supplies to assist them on their way, those who were engaging in this itinerant Gospel ministry. Now that could have included many things, as we go through the New Testament we see those things - it could have been money, it could have been food, it could have been anything like washing their clothes and mending their clothing. But the whole point of it was this: Christian love in Gaius was exemplified practically. Gaius was the man who helped God's work.

All faith, we are told in the Scriptures, must be proved by works. That is not Catholicism, that is Christianity. Turn with me for a moment to the epistle of James chapter 2 verses 14 to 16: 'What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone'. Friends, remember the parable of the Good Samaritan - have you ever read that verse where it says that the Good Samaritan then took out a tract and put it in his top pocket, the man who was lying bleeding by the side of the road? You don't read that. You don't read that he took it as an opportunity to share the Gospel to him. Now I'm not saying that we should never do that, but the whole point is this: let us not minimise the whole teaching. Many people take allegorical interpretations that would blow your mind, out of the good Samaritan, and miss the whole point! He was showing love, Christlike, unconditional love to a man that was in need. Our love must be expressed in deeds, God's word says, not just in words.

Look to John's first epistle if I need to remind you of what he said in chapter 3 verse 16: 'Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth'. Is that the way we love? Lord Shaftesbury was a great reformer in a political and religious sense, and there was a couple who were due to meet him at the station, but they had never met him before. They inquired of a friend of his: 'We don't know what he looks like, how will we recognise him?'. This friend of Lord Shaftesbury said: 'Well, when you see a tall man getting off the train and helping somebody, that'll be Lord Shaftesbury'. Sure enough they went down to the station, and a big tall man alighted from the coach carrying in one hand his suitcase, and in the other three bundles of a little old working lady's luggage.
John gives us the reason why he encouraged Gaius to help these missionary itinerants on their way. There are four, the first is: it honours God. He encouraged him to help them on their journey 'after a godly sort'. Now that literally means 'in a way that is worthy of God', a way that befits God. Someone has said: 'We are never more Godlike than when we are sacrificing to serve others'. Also because, verse 7 tells us, these missionary were doing this work for His name's sake, that's why they went forth. That means, as we've said from Matthew 25, that if you minister to them, you need to realise that they're doing this for God, and if you minister to them you're ministering to none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, for they are doing it for His name's sake - that name in whom there is salvation and no other name, that name which is above every name, that name to which every knee shall bow and tongue confess. Incidentally, this little epistle is the only book in the New Testament that doesn't specifically mention the name of the Lord Jesus Christ - but it doesn't matter, this is the synonym for it: 'the name', they went forth for the name of Jesus. That's why it honours God to honour them!

The second reason is that it is a testimony to the lost. You have to remember that many of these false teachers and preachers were wandering around churches and houses begging money to share their ideas: 'If the price is right I'll tell you what God told me'. Do you find that around today? I think we do. My skin crawls at times at some of these meetings that are ticketed with charges of £10 and £15, even in conservative evangelicalism to hear special preachers. Is that of God? I think not! You see, it's a testimony to the lost when believers support the work of God so that we're not going around with a hat asking them to give. It prevents this perception that the evangelist of the Gospel is after money, Jesus said: 'Freely you have received, therefore freely give'. To do anything else might even create in the mind of the unsaved a false ground of self-righteousness on which to rest: 'Because I've given to the Gospel ministry, in some way I'm on tick with God'. Right away, what a rebuke this is we see to the money raising methods in Christendom today. God's people should finance the work of the Gospel, and God's people alone - they took nothing of the pagans. Let us not put temptation in anyone's way to go to the world, and let us support God's work. Gaius did it.

It honours God, it's a testimony to the lost, thirdly: it is obedience to God's word. 'We therefore ought to receive such', verse 8 - we ought to receive such, we ought, why? Because God has taught us to: the ministry of hospitality in support of God's work is a command of God, it is obligatory to God's people. Turn with me for a moment to Galatians chapter 6, and often we miss the context of this portion of Scripture, Galatians 6 verse 6: 'Let him that is taught in the word', those who are recipients of the teaching of the word, 'communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things. Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing', that is, giving to the work of God, 'for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith'.

He makes it clear that believers in the church who have received spiritual blessings from those who minister in God's word ought to share, with those who minister, those material blessings. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 9, and it further explains this principle for us, verse 7: 'Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Say I these things as a man? or saith not the law the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take
care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?'.

It is obedience to God's word to help the Gospel on its way as Gaius did. It honours God, is a testimony to the lost, it is obedience to God's word, and fourthly: it accelerates world evangelisation. This is a beautiful phrase that John uses in verse 8, turn back with me to 3 John. He calls Gaius a 'fellowhelper': 'That we might be fellowhelpers to the truth'. It could be translated 'joint workers in the truth'. Now please note this, and I don't know what your gifts are here tonight, the Bible would teach us that we all have spiritual gifts - but most of us are not preachers, most of us are not public speakers, most of us are not involved in a so-called 'full-time ministry', whether as a pastor, a preacher, a missionary, an evangelist or a teacher, whatever it may be. Gaius may not have been someone who had a gift in public ministry, but nevertheless John says that he is a fellowhelper in the truth! He is defending contending for the truth, and by his liberality, his evangelical generosity, he is extending God's truth to the world!

That excites me, it should excite you. The Baptist missionary, the pioneer to India, William Carey who went to India in 1793 and spent the rest of his life there until he died in 1834 - despite many of the difficulties he faced, Carey was humble enough to appreciate that there were those at home who were praying, there were those who were giving sacrificially to the work in the field. Do you know what he called them? 'Rope-holders' - there they were at home, holding the rope. This is the imagery that he used: as they were holding the rope, he was venturing down what he described as 'the goldmine of India' gathering jewels for Jesus' crown. You may or may not be on the front line of the battle, so to speak, but isn't it wonderful that all of us can share in the work of God if we support those who are on the front line? There's no indication that Gaius was a preacher or a teacher, and this is a wonderful point for you to remember dear child of God, if you're of the same ilk: Gaius will receive reward at the judgment seat of Christ.

Here's a verse for you if you're a fellowhelper in the Gospel, it's Matthew 10 and verse 41, it's a verse that could be applied to those who give to the Gospel, it could be a verse applied to those who are married to those that are in the Gospel ministry, it could be a verse to those out on the mission field that are helping others in a practical ministry. Matthew 10:41, listen to it: 'He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward' - I think that's marvellous. Gaius will receive the reward of all the preachers he ever entertained. Whatever blessings come from a preacher's ministry, those who have cared for him, those who have helped him, those who have speeded him on his way will have his reward credited to their account.

Philippians 4:16-17 says: 'For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity'. Paul was speaking of financial aid to his work, and this is what he goes on to say: 'You sent it, and I perhaps needed it and there was maybe a request, not because I desire a gift - no, no, no - but I desire fruit that may abound to your account'. He knew they would be rewarded. Can I ask you: what reward will you have at the Judgment Seat for your spiritual health, for your open hospitality, for your evangelical generosity? Do you have an open home? An open heart? An open hand? Are you a Gaius, the man or the woman who helped God's work? The lesson is: God one day will pay back every good deed. Let me finish with this poem which encapsulates the spirit of the message:
'We cannot all be heroes
And thrill the hemisphere
With some great daring venture,
Some deed that mocks at fear;
But we can fill a lifetime
With kindly acts and true,
There's always noble service
For noble hearts to do.

We cannot all be preachers,
And sway with voice and pen,
As strong winds sway the forest,
The minds and hearts of men;
But we can be evangels
To souls within our reach,
There's always love's own gospel
For loving hearts to preach.

We cannot all be martyrs,
And win a deathless name
By some divine baptism,
Some ministry of fame.
But we can live for truth's sake,
Can do for Christ and dare,
There's always faithful witness
For faithful hearts to bear'.

Come back next week and we'll look at 'Diotrephes, The Man Who Hindered God's Work'.

Father, help us all, we pray, to follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who laid His life down and gave it a ransom for us all. Even so may we lay our lives down for the brethren, and for the furtherance of Thy kingdom. Lord, may we all be fellowhelpers in the work of this Gospel. Let us be a help to the testimony of Jesus, God forbid that any should be a hindrance. Amen.
We'll read through all of this epistle once more to get the flow of John's thought. So, 3 John verse 1: "The elder unto the wellbeloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth. For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth".

Now verses 9 to 11 are the verses that we'll be concentrating on this evening, so take special note of them: "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God. Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true. I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee: But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name".

Now if you were with us last Monday evening you'll remember that in verses 1 to 8 we concentrated on the first character that we encounter within this little epistle, that is Gaius - and we gave him the title 'The Man Who Helped God's Work'. We saw within him the characteristics of a man who is walking in truth. We've heard a lot in 1st and 2nd John about how the truth was not only incarnate in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ literally in an objective form, but the truth of the Gospel is to be incarnate within us in the subjective sense that we are to personify, to manifest, witness the truth of Jesus Christ in how we walk as He walked. John, and of course the Holy Spirit through John, gives us Gaius as such an example. Next week, in the will of the Lord, we'll be looking at Demetrius in the remainder of the verses, verses 12 through 14, and I've entitled him 'The Man Who Was Honoured In God's Work' - and he is set forth here by John as a commendable example to which all of us, any of us in Christendom, could follow.

But this evening we're going to look at the second character, that is Diotrephes, and I've entitled him: 'The Man Who Hindered God's Work'. Now though we will embark on somewhat of a negative critique of this man Diotrephes this evening, let me start off on a positive note - that is, that there's an element of comfort that we should know when we consider that the early church, way back in the days when John, the only surviving apostle of our Lord Jesus
Christ, though he was in old age, was still alive, they struggled with many of the problem issues, and indeed many of the same type of problem people that we struggle with in the church today. Now, you might say: 'Well, that's some comfort!' - well, it is in a sense, because sometimes we have some kind of an idyllic view of the early Christian church, as if they had this Utopian existence without any sort of problems at all. But that was far from the case, as we see from many of the corrective epistles in the New Testament. But it gives us great insight into how we can face some of these problem issues and problem people within the church of Jesus Christ today. We get a real 'fly on the wall' experience of the early church, their problems and their people, from this third epistle.

Diotrephes and Gaius are poles apart as we shall see tonight. They are, if you like, at opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum - yet it's interesting to note that they probably dwelt under the same church roof. We may go as far as to say that perhaps they were even on the same oversight. Let me just say before I go on any further that sometimes, when you do certain character studies and outline certain features in biblical characters, people can read between the lines in your preaching and think that you're singling out individuals within the church - your local church, your specific church. That's an occupational hazard for a preacher, and let me just say certainly: 'If the hat fits, wear it', that's what God's word is all about - but I always seek when I'm exegeting God's word not to try and be personal, but yet we have to apply God's word as it is found within the Scriptures. But please be assured that I'm not trying to single out any one or two individuals in particular, though you might feel God's hand pointing at you. Indeed Dr A. T. Robinson wrote an article for a Southern Baptist State magazine, and he described the conduct of Diotrephes within that article - but I think he omitted to mention the man's name, and 25 Baptist deacons from various Baptist churches wrote to the editor and cancelled their subscription, contending that he was writing about them!

Now maybe that's you tonight, I don't know, that's between you and the Lord - but follow with me, and let us see the characteristics of this man Diotrephes, the man who hindered the work of God. First of all what I want us to do is look at Diotrephes' attitude, and that's going to take up most of our evening. Then I want us to look secondly at John the apostle's approach, how he handled this man. Then thirdly, the admonition that he gives to all of us that we find in verse 11, the type of example that we ought to follow as individual believers.

So let us look first of all at Diotrephes' attitude. The first and obvious thing that we find about him is in verse 9: 'I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not'. The first thing we see about his attitude is that he loved preeminence, he loves to be first and foremost within the assembly. Now, you get no prizes for guessing that this sin is neither ancient nor modern, it is something that is perennial within the church of Jesus Christ. For some people who love to be first and foremost within the local assembly, the church can take on the appearance of a stage on which they can strut and gain the applause and the prestige from other believers. I would have to say that from the little experience that I have, sometimes the types of people that love preeminence - whilst Diotrephes might be an exception to this rule - sometimes they are people who cannot achieve the outside the church, or have not achieved elsewhere. Because of that they see the church, if you like, as an easy opening to gain power and recognition because you don't have to have a certain education, or a certain societal or social prestige. The fact of the matter is: many see their opportunity to gain a power base in the church because we are meant to be a people that look on folk by grace, and look for the gifts of the Spirit, rather than those qualifications that we find outside the church.
Now I'm not sure, I don't think at least that Diotrephes was such an individual - but we need to beware if we are such individuals. There are several suggestions that have been given by scholars to the type of person and character that Diotrephes was. George G. Finley in his commentary suggested that the name 'Diotrephes' means 'Zeus reared', that is to put it in another term 'the nursling of Zeus', that is the king of the gods. Now, he's suggesting that that name and its definition would suggest that Diotrephes belonged to the Greek aristocracy. Now whether that is the case or not, we cannot prove it of course: whatever Diotrephes was, he certainly acted in the church like an aristocrat, whether or not he was of aristocratic blood.

It is noteworthy that we see this trait even in the church of Jesus Christ today. If he had certain status outside of the church, he perhaps felt that he should have the same status inside the church. There are those today that believe the same. Now they mightn't articulate it, but you see it often when a new elder or a new deacon is appointed - because you have a certain professional capacity in a secular sense, they believe that you should be promoted within the assembly.

Now that might just be a personal desire for greater acknowledgement, or it might take the form, we believe that this was such with Diotrephes, of a desire for a higher position. Let me say this categorically, whatever has or has not happened in your particular assembly: professional achievement outside the church should never ever be a reason for promotion in the assembly - and if we operate on that level, let it be categorically said upon the foundation of Scripture that we are operating in a carnal way. It proves our carnality if that is how we discern those who are gifted in leadership within the assembly.

Then there are others, some scholars, very well recognised ones, who consider that Diotrephes was the first monarchical Bishop of Asia. Now a monarchical Bishop is simply one man who was an elder who gained precedence over what was a formerly equal leadership, and he rises to the fore. Now whether or not that is so, surely it is true that Diotrephes may illustrate the trend towards this monarchical episcopate that we see coming to the fore in the second century of church history and is with us today in the Roman Catholic system and in the Anglican system. It may not be the actual case that that's what Diotrephes was doing, but certainly this truth can be applied to this episcopate that we have in certain churches today, and even applied to the 'one man ministry' that in many senses is unscriptural.

Now, where does that leave us this evening? We don't know the specific circumstances of Diotrephes. It may have been that, like the elder lady in 2 John, the church met in his house, and because of that fact he desired a little more influence in it after all while, and he didn’t like the extended authority that the apostle John had - and he thought to himself: 'Well, we should become an independent body, and we should go our own way, and I'll lead the way in that'. Whatever the plausibility of those views, it must be said that Diotrephes' sin was not so much the office that he held or the office that he aspired to, but it was the attitude that he held in his heart. That's Diotrephes' sin: his self-appointed position was only a symptom of his underlying pride. He wished to be first, he wished to have the preeminence - and that sin, and it is sin, is the original sin, it is the greatest of all sins. I've told you many times before that quote from C. S. Lewis that: 'Pride is the sin that made the devil the devil'. It made him who he is today. He was unwilling to be what God had created him to be, and because of that he fell. He desired rather to be, as Isaiah 14:14 says, like the Most High God. Now when he came in the form of a serpent to Eve in the Garden of Eden, he brought the same temptation of pride to humankind, and he said in Genesis 3 verse 5: 'Ye shall be as gods', another translation is valid in saying that he said to Eve, 'Ye shall be as God'. She aspired in her proud heart to be like the Most High - the original sin in Lucifer's heart and in Eve and Adam's heart.
Now we say in converse to this that this desire that was in Diotrephes to have the preeminence, that we find in Lucifer, we find in Eve - it is the antithesis, the exact opposite of what we find in the nature of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:6-8 is a case in point: 'Who, being in the form of God', by very nature God, 'thought it not robbery', or something to be grasped at, 'to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'. Satan's way is to exalt himself, and because he sought to be as the Most High, Isaiah 14 and 15 tells us that God said to him: 'Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit'. But God's way is in Christ, and because of Christ's humility, Christ's obedience, Christ's submission to the will of God, we read in Philippians 2:9: 'Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name'.

Diotrephes, perhaps unconsciously, was following a Satanic example - all Diotrephes do it. They may not be aware of it, but the fact of the matter is: as Christians, Christ's-ones, we should always follow His example - and His example is never to seek the preeminence. His example can be mirrored in John the Baptist: 'He must increase, and I must decrease'. We must be willing, and indeed operative to eclipse ourselves in the shadow of Christ. The question is: do we? Or do we love to have the preeminence? Of course, we all have an old nature that does love that. We need to admit it, if we're in denial then we probably have a greater problem. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus Christ has taught us that the kind of men that He sees fit to lead and oversee His church are not Diotrephes, they are men who know what it is to serve in the truest sense.

Now if you want to know what that is, turn with me to Matthew's gospel chapter 20 and beginning to read at verse 25. Now mark these words very carefully, especially if you are in leadership, verse 25 of Matthew 20: 'But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister', not to be served, but to serve, 'and to give his life a ransom for many'.

The path to greatness within the church is servitude. It's different than the secular realm, and if you bring the standards and the values of the world into the church you're going to fail as a man of God or as an assembly of God's people. Just to prove that this is not an isolated record within Matthew's gospel, Peter, an apostle himself, equal with John and Paul and all the rest, warned his fellow elders - if you turn with me to 1 Peter chapter 5. Please do note, just as an aside, that Peter wasn't speaking as a pope to his cardinals, he was speaking as one among equals - not just as an apostle, but as a fellow elder to those who he is addressing in chapter 5 verses 2 and 3. He says: 'Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock'.

Because we are so carnal at times and we have a fleshly, fallen, Adamic nature, it's so easy to equate power in the assembly with rulership - and there is a difference. Authority is not equal in the assembly to lording it over the brethren. The prime mark of leadership is not seeking to be preeminent, but seeking to be a servant - that is greatness in the kingdom of God. I heard a lovely story about D. L. Moody, that famed Bible teacher and Gospel evangelist. Late one night in the Moody Bible Institute after a convention, Moody was wandering around the halls to see that everything was in order. He turned a corner and came upon the guest room where
Pastor David Legge

Are you too big for service? If any of us are too big for that type of service, we're too big for God. Diotrephes, in contrast, sought to exalt himself. Now there's nothing in the Bible to suggest - and this is a salient point - that in any way Diotrephes had invited false teachers into his home. There's no indication that Diotrephes was subscribing to some false doctrine that they were teaching. He was not a heretic as far as we know, he was probably as orthodox as John the apostle himself - but the problem with Diotrephes was his attitude of heart. Oh, if there's a lesson for us today in our particular breed of Christianity and evangelicalism, it is this: that such narcissism that we find in a character like Diotrephes is still present with us today in the Christian church! Churches that are in the pocket of one man! Churches that are ruled by one family dynasty down through the years! Churches that are swayed by vocal personalities and by threats of power! This was Diotrephes' sin, and it's still sin to love preeminence.

Then the second attitude he had was that he did not recognise John. We see this in verse 9, if you turn back to 3 John, he says: 'He receiveth us not'. Other translations translate it validly: 'He does not accept us'. Now John was the great apostle, as I've said so many times, and the only one still alive who knew the Lord Jesus Christ in His earthly ministry - so why on earth would a Christian reject one of the apostles? This is why: because John was a threat to Diotrephes' monopoly of power in his local assembly. Here it is evidenced, we've got an allusion to the fact that John had already written to this little church - and the likelihood, reading between the lines, is that the letter was destroyed by Diotrephes himself. Perhaps that's why this time he writes to Gaius, because that's the only way he could be sure that the letter would get eventually to the church. Then we find that after the letter is probably destroyed, John sends emissaries, evangelists, missionaries to go and speak to Diotrephes in the assembly face-to-face. But we read then that Diotrephes rejects them, he sends them away.

What this is in effect, and this is what you need to note, is a rejection by Diotrephes of the apostolic authority. Now, I know you're sitting there tonight saying: 'Tut, tut, that's terrible, isn't it? Imagine doing such a thing!' - but friends, the equivalent sin today of rejecting apostolic authority is to reject the apostles' doctrine that we have in the New Testament, and there are myriads of churches in the West presently, even in Ulster, that are rejecting the apostolic authority of the New Testament in favour of the latest fad or fashion, or the latest philosophy of the current evangelical guru. It could just be, even in our particular circles, rejecting the word of God for the tradition and the wisdom of men - and that is the same sin as rejecting apostolic authority! Are we doing that?
He loved the preeminence, he did not recognise John, thirdly: he slandered the apostle. He writes in verse 10: 'Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words'. He spread malicious gossip. That word 'prating', it's the only time you find it in the New Testament, and that's what it means: to babble incoherently, to gossip. It means literally 'bringing false and empty charges against us'. It's true that an empty receptacle will make a lot of noise, and it is those who are empty, those who are devoid of real, true, deep spirituality who make the most noise - particularly in gossip. The Greek verb translated 'gossiping' or 'prating' comes from a root that is used of the action of water when it boils up. You imagine it on the stove, and a pot of water boiling over, it throws off a lot of bubbles - that's the word used here. Since bubbles are empty and useless, the verb is communicating that this is an indulgence of empty people who engage in useless talk - it's the nature of Diotrephes' slander, of all slander, when it is sheer nonsense.

Someone has said: 'A loose tongue that is incredibly well oiled, that's what Diotrephes had'. In all likelihood it was at one of the church meetings where Diotrephes stood to his feet, perhaps after the letter from John and the emissaries who visited, and it became known in the assembly that John had made embassage to them, that there in the meeting he slanders the great apostle - he openly rebukes him in front of the church when he's not there present to defend himself! Now we don't know what he said, maybe he said: 'John's awful tight, isn't he?', or 'John's a bit weird', or 'John's that old that he's losing touch, senile dementia has set in' - it doesn't really matter what Diotrephes was saying about John. In fact, I believe that he's so power hungry, like many people in his possession, that for him he has an operative pragmatism that the end justifies the means. It doesn't matter what is said or claimed, or what rumour is spun, as long as the authority of the apostle John is undermined - that's all he seeks, and he doesn't care how he gets it.

The point is this, and I want you to note it: Diotrephes desired to slant people's thinking against the great apostle - that is always the goal of slander. One night before a church service at which hundreds of people were present, a man called Jim Voss, who was a security electronics expert, decided he would be a bit mischievous and wire the whole building in several spots in the church with microphones. At the end of the service he told the congregation he had recorded several conversations from all the parts of the church, and he was going to play them back the next evening at church again. When the service ended several men approached Voss and offered him big amounts of money to buy the tapes off him! Then he found out that he actually hadn't pressed the record button, but nevertheless the lesson was learned! But the fact of the matter is: God records everything that we say, He knows. What difference does it make if what we say in private is declared public? I know it does make a difference to us, but it should not - we should regulate what we say in private as if it were public.

Now let me say this: in conservative evangelicalism, often there is a censorious spirit, a highly critical attitude that at times imagines that things are worse with other Christians than they really are. Sometimes it creates problems with Christians individually, or with organisations in the Christian church, problems that really don't exist - but we create them, why do we do it? Because we love to have the preeminence, and we love to slander others - and sometimes the simpleminded among us gullibly believe these slanderings. Warren Weirsbe mentioned a certain publication to one of his friends, and his friend replied: 'Yes, I know the editor quite well, he's like a blotter; he takes everything in and gets it backward'. That's often what we are like: we don't filter what we hear - I hope you don't believe everything you hear! I hope you don't believe everything that Christians tell you! I hope we all - and I'm as guilty as anyone of not doing this - I hope we all filter everything we hear through Philippians 4:8:...
Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

But do you do what our pride seeks to do? Just what Diotrephes did: it seeks to pull other's reputations down - why? Because it makes us look all the taller, that's why you talk about people - that's why I do it too, to my shame - but it's sin. Here's a lesson that's hard to learn: if you want a better pastor, and if you want better elders, better leaders, pray for the ones you have. I think of that hymn by Cowper:

'Were half the breath thus vainly spent
To heaven in supplication sent,
Your cheerful song would oftener be,
'Hear what the Lord has done for me''.

He slandered the apostle. Not only did he love the preeminence, and not recognise John, and slander him to the church; but he refused to receive even brethren who were John's associates. He went a little bit further! Now Gaius received the emissaries, the evangelists from John, we see that in verse 5 and he is commended for doing such - but it was Diotrephes that refused them entrance into the church. Now what this was in effect was guilt by association - you've heard of that, haven't you? Let me say this: it is impossible to practise this kind of separation - that is, guilt by association - with any degree of consistency. Let me say clearly that the scripture makes it obvious that we are to have no fellowship with apostates - sure 1 John makes that quite clear, as does Peter and Jude, and many other epistles in the New Testament. We are to refrain from him entangling alliances with unbelievers, as 2 Corinthians 6 tells us not to be unequally yoked with them. We are to avoid those whose doctrinal position is clearly contrary to Scripture - but that does not mean that we do not cooperate with others who don't agree with us on fine, intricate doctrines and details of Scripture. Those who do not particularly interpret Scripture exactly as we do, we do not have authority to write them off! If any Scripture teaches this, it is this little book. There are good and there are godly people who disagree on some matters - you say: 'What matters?'. Well, for instance, some take different views on church government. 'Oh', you're saying, 'You're not going to tell us the Presbyterians are okay, are you?' - well, many of them are your brothers and sisters in Christ, whatever you think about them! But I wasn't so much thinking of that - you know the brethren don't have deacons, but you never hear much said about that, but it's scriptural, isn't it?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, that's what matters, as long as the fundamentals are not transgressed. Here's another one: prophecy - yes, prophecy. I don't find anywhere within the Scripture that you're to refuse fellowship because of a person's particular view on prophecy. I have my view, you have yours, we teach one view in the assembly, and I think we ought, and I think all assemblies should do such - because only then can you have consistency within your Bible exposition - but we have no right to write others off if they disagree with us. According to this epistle: Christ, His Gospel, is the grounds of fellowship. You see the problem with guilt by association is this, now listen carefully: you can never know everything about everybody. I know some people think they know everything about everything, but they don't. If I can be personal for a moment, not so long ago we had a preacher who was recommended to us who was exactly correct according to the dispensational scheme of prophetic truth, yet we found out from somebody reading his book a couple of weeks later that he didn't believe in hell. Now it's impossible to find out those things, everything about everybody, but that shows
us that though a man may be orthodox on one secondary issue, he could be fundamentally erroneous and heretical in an important essential issue.

Warren Wiersbe says a Christian person would need a computer and a full-time staff if he ever hoped to do a good job of keeping his associations pure. All of us must agree on the fundamentals, that is the grounds of fellowship. However, to do what Diotrephes did is sin! What was that? He broke personal fellowship with a brother because he didn't agree with his circles of friends - now that's going beyond Scripture! Ironside defined Diotrephes in this manner, and his actions here: 'He was of a narrow sectarian spirit, one of those men who despised these freelancers. He desired to recognise only those who were of their particular stripe’. He goes on: 'To him, church order meant more than love to Christ's sheep. They may be found not only in the great denominations', Diotrephes that is, 'but in the humblest Christian assemblies, self-seeking, self-important, self-elected bishops and overseers lording it over their brethren, and abrogating to themselves the right to say who may or may not be recognised as true, authentic children of God'.

Diotrephes rejected John, then he rejected those who associated with John, but he went further: he forbade others receiving John and his emissaries. He not only refused the missionaries, but he refused any of the congregation to take them in, and he was taking his authority beyond biblical limits. Now listen to this: we are to obey those that have the rule over us, and an overseer has every right to tell the sheep what God tells them, but no overseer has a right to impose upon a believer what God’s word does not impose upon them - that's going beyond the limits of their God-given authority.

Then sixthly, that didn't suffice, he actually excommunicated those that did flirt and fraternise with these 'false disciples', as he saw them. Now let me say that there is such a thing as right use of excommunication. Excommunication is in God's word, though it is not practised today in most churches. Paul called upon the Corinthians on one occasion to expel a member who was guilty of sexual relations with his father's wife, that is his stepmother. In 1 Corinthians 5 the church was to put them out. The idea of it was designed in order to bring that person to repentance again, 1 Corinthians 5 verse 5, that's the whole purpose of it: that they will come to their senses, the offender, and repent and return to fellowship. It was also to protect the fellowship from moral and spiritual pollution. But it wasn’t just on moral grounds that excommunication was exercised, but also on doctrinal grounds. There were those in the church who Paul was writing through Timothy to, who maintained that the resurrection of the body had already taken place, and Paul said that he was handing them over to Satan, that they might learn not to blaspheme - 1 Timothy 1:20, 2 Timothy 2:16-18. Even our Lord Jesus Christ, in His letter to the seven churches, and His letter specifically to Thyatira - through, incidentally, the apostle John, the same man who is writing 3 John - told that church in Thyatira to expel the false prophetess Jezebel, who was leading some into immorality and idolatry - Revelation 2:20.

So we see that excommunication is Biblical, it should be exercised on moral and doctrinal grounds - but Diotrephes did not exercise proper biblical excommunication, rather he was using this as an engagement in a powerplay. He was throwing his weight around. You see, the Bible does not just advocate discipline, it advocates loving and holy discipline. Warren Wiersbe cites examples, he says: 'It could be a pastor throwing his weight around, or a church board acting like a police court'. It is the Lord - that is what it is meant to be - exercising spiritual authority through a local church in order to rescue and restore an erring child of God. Augustine of Hippo said: 'One thing I say deliberately as unquestionable truth, that if any believer has been wrongfully excommunicated the sentence will do harm rather to him who
pronounces it, than to him who suffers the wrong'. There's a great responsibility with the power that is given to overseers in the assembly. There's a danger - and let me say that I believe that elders should have the rule of the assembly, don't misunderstand what I'm saying this evening. I don't believe the tail should wag the dog. But when you believe in a scriptural eldership, you must always be careful to guard against the Diotrephes spirit - because the eldership can very easily deteriorate into an unscriptural dictatorship. There must be some form of accountability, accountability to God, accountability to fellow overseers, accountability to the church, and there must be some mechanism whereby people can be fairly heard, objectively.

His attitude was that he loved the preeminence, he did not recognise John, he slandered the apostle, he refused to receive the brethren, John's associates - he forbid others receiving them, and he excommunicated those that did. Secondly, and we're nearly finished - these aren't as long by the way - John's approach. We've seen Diotrephes' attitude, what was John's approach? Now one might think that Diotrephes' conduct might well have deserved that John should say: 'See when I get to see you? You'll be out on your ear boy!'. When we think of the fact that this man was guilty of excommunicating people on wrong grounds, should it not have been the case that he should have been excommunicated? But significantly John does not allude to that fact - now I'm not saying he didn't do it, we don't know, but he doesn't threaten Diotrephes with it in this letter. He only says that he will come, and literally what he says is that he will call to attention what Diotrephes was doing. Verse 10: 'I will remember his deeds', literally 'I'll let it be known to the assembly what he's been up to'. He would expose Diotrephes!

Now no doubt he did exercise discipline, and may well have excommunicated him, but what I want you to see is that what John wanted to display was the character of the Lord Jesus Christ, who desires that sinners should not be condemned, but should come to repentance and be restored to fellowship with God through Him - that should be our goal will always. It's interesting to note that John was willing to talk to Diotrephes. You should always be willing to talk, sometimes others aren't so willing. Paul took the same risk when he went to Corinth on what he called in 2 Corinthians 2:1 his 'painful visit' - it's not always easy being in leadership and facing Diotrephes. In 2 Corinthians, there is evidence that Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles, was asked to leave the church of Corinth against his own will! Those in charge decided that the apostle Paul was not welcome in Corinth! Imagine this in the early church: the apostle's not welcome!

Fortunately the efforts of mediators like Titus caused the church to repent, and Paul to return eventually - but I'm sure there's a great temptation in John's heart just to avoid Diotrephes, just to fall silent. John's approach was Christlike in leadership. Let me say that leaders get a hard time - but all the attributes of leadership ought to be found in the Christian, because they're Christlike attributes. Are we Christlike in our approach even to those who have offended?

Diotrephes' attitude, John's approach, and finally: our admonition in verse 11 - 'Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God'. Now we should never seek to be mimics of other people in one sense, we ought to have an authentic walk with God ourselves and try to hone our own character true to our nature and personality - but nevertheless, imitation is a part of natural life, isn't it? We look up to others who we esteem and respect, we all do it - but the important thing that John says is: make sure that you choose the right models to look up to. Choose a Gaius, later we see that he sets up Demetrius as a man who is held in honour within the
church and the work of God - but Diotrephes is an evil example, Demetrius is a good example. Make sure, John says, that you follow that which is good, not that which is evil.

Sometimes strong personalities come to the fore within the church, often in the pulpit. It's very easy, without sounding patronising, for simple souls to look up to them so much that they make them their role model when there is very little of the grace of Christ in their lives. A man or woman may be strong, they may be vocal, they may be opinionated, they may have aptitude on a certain level - but make sure, John says, that you choose a spiritual example, a Christlike example. I haven't been in the Lord's work too long, but I've learned this much in the short time that I've been in it: much of the distress and the cause for division in churches has very little to do with doctrine. Sometimes that's the facade that is used to mask, in hypocrisy, personality clashes and problems with other people. Diotrephes and church dictators are dangerous people. Let me say that we should never ever underestimate how a resident dictator can damage a church - do you know why? Because such leadership grieves the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus Christ is the only Head of the church. Colossians 1:18 says: 'He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence' - He is to be Lord in the assembly, no one else!

Diotrephes had forgotten that, maybe he had never known it. The Holy Spirit is to be the only vicar or representative of Christ in the church, and no man or woman has the right to take charge, to make decisions, to receive brethren or reject brethren as Diotrephes did - that is Christ's role, the Holy Spirit's role, and if it's ever found in the hands of men apart from the Spirit's leading, do you know what that is? Popery. That's what it is. It could be red, white and blue popery, I don't care, that's what it is. Such conduct is what God hates. Do you know something? Jesus says that such conduct will be judged. John says these people don't even know God, they've never seen God - Diotrephes that is. Then in Mark 12 Jesus said: 'Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, And the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: Which devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayers' - now listen to this, this is scary stuff - 'these shall receive greater condemnation'.

Such will be punished severely, Jesus says. Loss of reward if they're child of God. If they've never seen God, like Diotrephes, but have a facade of Christianity but are really of fraud in leadership, they'll be in hell. I'm sure Diotrephes wasn't looking forward to meeting John. Friends, the time is coming very soon when we're going to meet the Lord. We're going to face Him, we're going to give an account not to an apostle, but to the Lord of the churches: 'So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God' - what kind of example have you been? A Gaius, a Demetrius, or a Diotrephes spirit?

Can I finish with this lovely story: some years ago a hospital official in Atlanta, Georgia in the States, after watching the lives of professing Christians in that large denominational hospital, concluded - as so many people in the world observing our witness do - I quote: 'They just don't live what they preach, and if they can't then I couldn't either'. That's what people are saying. Now someone was there, and raised their voice and mentioned the exemplary life of the pastor of the large nearby church. This hospital official who had made those remarks decided that he would see if this preacher's life measured up to this profession of him. Do you know what he did? He hired a plain clothed detective to follow the pastor everywhere for a whole week, and at the end of the week the detective declared: 'He lives it! There's no flaw there'. Now those words were inescapable evidence to that man, and they tortured him, they rang in his ears hour after hour, he was in great despair, he didn't know what to do. With the help of his godly wife he eventually accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord.
After that he spent his spare time labouring for the Lord in many ways, including the holding of Open Air meetings in his own particular town.

Now, his daughter eventually attended the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and this man's story that I have just recounted to you was recorded within their student newspaper. The article revealed the name of the preacher, his identity, and it was Dr Will H. Houghton, one-time pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle in Atlanta who later became, by this time, the president of the Moody Bible Institute. At the end of this article this hospital worker's daughter asked the question rhetorically of every student, and I'm asking it of you tonight in the spirit of John's third epistle, listen: suppose Dr Houghton had not lived a sincere, true Christian life, one that would bear watching, where would my Daddy be today?

You know the Diotrephes spirit is something that is not unique to leadership, it can be in all our hearts - indeed, I think naturally it is - to want the preeminence. We all have a struggle with our tongues at times, and we can identify with Diotrephes in many ways. But the question tonight is not if it's there - we all confess, I confess it's there in me - it's whether or not we'll confess to Christ, and bow the knee and submit to His authority, and allow His Spirit to bring the fruit of Christ-likeness, and humility, and servitude into our lives.

Lord, help us, this is really strong stuff for all of us to take in. There's none of us that can say that we have apprehended that for which we've been apprehended in Christ. We're not there, we haven't reached it. Lord, help us to see our shortcomings, help us to see if we are a problem, or a spirit or an attitude we have is a problem rather than a solution to the problem. Lord, we pray that You'll help us to implement obedience to Your word. Lord, take a dealing with all our hearts, from the hierarchy at the top of every church right to the bottom, may we all seek to be Christlike spirits, with minds like Jesus, esteeming others better and before ourselves - for it's in His name we pray, Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - May 2006
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3 John - Chapter 23

"Demetrius - The Man Who Was Honoured In God's Work"

W

e're going to read from verse 1 again, and my message tonight is focusing upon verses 11 to 14, the character of 'Demetrius - The Man Who Was Honoured in God's Work'.

Verse 1: "The elder unto the wellbeloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth. For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth. I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God. Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true. I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee: But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name".

We have already said that John, in his third epistle, gives us, if you like, a fly on the wall experience of life in the first century early Christian church. In his third epistle in particular, that experience of first century church life comes to us revolving around personalities. After John himself, who is the author and who is intrinsically involved in the situation encapsulated within the book, we have first of all Gaius. He, we entitled, was 'The Man Who Helped God's Work', and he is greatly commended in the first number of verses of this epistle. He is, in fact, the man who characterises one who walks in the truth. In verse 2 we saw that he is described by John as being a man who is spiritually healthy - and, whilst he was physically sick, John's prayer for him in the opening words of the book are that his physical health would mirror his spiritual vitality and zeal.

Then secondly we saw that he was openly hospitable. Gaius not only opened his home to the missionaries and itinerants who were sent from John the apostle to this particular church, but he opened his heart to them, he was genuinely hospitable and he also opened his hand. We saw that he gave to the work of God, he was evangelically generous. In verse 6 it speaks of his charity, and the reasons are given by John for Gaius' charity: he gave to the work of God and furthered these missionaries on in their endeavours because it honours God. He was encouraged by John to continue this work of charity toward them 'after a godly sort', because
these missionaries had gone out 'for the name's sake'. Then secondly we see that it was also encouraged because it is a testimony to the lost, 'taking nothing of the Gentiles' - they weren't charging for the word of God or the giving of the Gospel, but as they had freely received they were freely giving. It was also obedience to God's word, it was something that they ought to do, John says - support the work of the Gospel. We found out finally that he was to be evangelically generous because it accelerates world evangelisation. He was a fellow helper in the work of the global mission of Christ.

So that is the first character, the first personality in this church whom we encountered - Gaius, who helped God's work. Then secondly, last week we looked at 'Diotrephes - The Man Who Hindered God's Work'. We concentrated first of all on Diotrephes' attitude. It can be seen that he loved the preeminence, he loved to be number one within this church. If you want to know more about these things, do get the tape. Then secondly, he did not recognise the apostle John. He went as far as not only not recognising him, but slandering the apostle in the church and before the other believers. Then fourthly we found out that he refused to receive the brethren who John sent as emissaries, John's associates, these missionaries, he wouldn't give them admittance into the church. He went further, fifthly, to actually forbid others receiving them. He wouldn't have them, but he wouldn't let anyone else show them hospitality. Indeed we found out, sixthly, that he excommunicated those who did accept them into the church - Diotrephes' attitude.

Then we also saw John's approach to Diotrephes. He intended to meet him face to face and call attention to what he was doing in the church. We saw that he did it in a Christlike manner and in a gracious way, but nevertheless he was not dodging the issue. Then thirdly, and this is the point at which I want to start off where we left off last Monday evening, we find that John, in the background of these two personalities - Gaius and Diotrephes - and in anticipation of the third personality we're going to look at tonight, gives us this maxim in verse 11 - our admonition: 'Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God'. It's as if he's saying: 'If you want a role model to follow, here's my man' - verse 12 - 'Demetrius hath good report of all men'.

I've entitled Demetrius, 'The Man Who Was Honoured in God's Work'. He is given to us tonight as a commendable example of a role model that all of us, irrespective of who we are, could and should follow. Now he's introduced to us in this third epistle without any explanation whatsoever, and that suggests to me at least that he must have been well-known. Now a couple of weeks ago we looked at some other Demetrius' who are found in scripture, and one of them is found in Acts chapter 19 - he was a man who made silver shrines of Artemis, a god in Ephesus, and he was also the man who raised a riot against the apostle Paul because his preaching of the gospel was delivering people from idolatry and was threatening his life trade. We find that it was because of this man, Demetrius, the subsequent riot, that Paul's two year ministry in the city of Ephesus was terminated. This was a great sinner and, if this is the same Demetrius, you can imagine how people all over the church would have been aware of his miraculous conversion and any change of a subsequent holy life that resulted through grace. But we have not one shred of evidence to tell us that this Demetrius in 3 John is that Demetrius in Acts chapter 19 - it's a nice thought, but the truth is we don't know an awful lot about this man. He may have been the bearer of this third epistle and, like the rest of the emissaries that John sent, he was refused by Diotrephes. We don't know that for sure either, but at any rate, one thing we do know about him, which is the most important thing, is that he had a good testimony from all and from the truth itself - verse 12 tells us. In other words,
the truth that we've been hearing so much about in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd epistles of John, the truth was the standard by which Demetrius was tested. Having been so tested by the truth, he stood approved of the church, of those outside the church, of the apostle John himself, and of the truth itself. Because of that, John set him forth as an example to all of us of that which is good, that which we should follow.

Now it's an undeniable fact of human nature that we naturally imitate other people. Now you might not like to think that, but that's a fact. A US author and lawyer called Christian Nestell Bovee said this: 'We unconsciously imitate what pleases us, and approximate to the characters we most admire'. If you admire someone, if someone's character trait pleases you, it's a natural reaction in our human nature to try and imitate them, and follow them, and copy them. George Swinnock, a Christian writer, said: 'Man is a creature led more by patterns than by precepts'. Human beings naturally follow examples, whether they be good examples or bad ones. A Jewish comedian on one occasion recalled that his overprotective mother, when she took him first of all to his first day of primary school, insisted on talking to the teacher before leaving him with her. The comedian said that, among other things, his mother told the teacher that if he misbehaved she should punish the boy next to him. 'Why?', said the teacher. 'Well', the mother said, 'My little boy learns from example'.

We're all a bit like that, aren't we? It's not just children. I think children, to a large extent, don't understand anything but through example - and we must never underestimate the power of example from infancy, to adulthood, right through to old age. Someone has rightly said - grasp, please, the magnitude of this statement - 'Example is more powerful than precept'. Thomas Brooks, the puritan, said: 'Example is the most powerful rhetoric'. Now, we as Christians, Bible believing evangelicals, are big on emphasising the word of God, and rightly so because that is God's revelation, it is our rule of faith, it is the only place that we find salvation, it is the standard and rule and principal of the church. But the fact of the matter is, our biblical emphasis is never ever to be at the expense of practical godliness - example, rather than our knowledge of the Scriptures and our study of it, ought to augment and add to and enhance everything that is in our lives as a witness of Jesus Christ.

You remember we found in John's epistles that the goal of the Gospel was not just to have an objective incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God in human flesh, but also - now that He has ascended and sent His Spirit at Pentecost - to have a subjective incarnation of the life of Christ in the life of every believer. Therefore, our example is worth a thousand arguments! A good example is a language all of its own, and an argument that everybody understands from the youngest, simplest child, to the oldest and wisest man. Someone put it like this: 'Well done' is always better than 'Well said'. We say a lot of things, don't we? But precept may lead a person, instruct a person, command a person, order a person - but only example draws a person.

Do you see the difference? Well, if you do, or if you don't, let's see how John sets it forth in this third character, Demetrius, tonight - the man who was honoured in God's work as a great example for all of us to follow. I want to ask you the first question of two: what example do you follow? John is setting forth Demetrius as an example for everyone, but I wonder do you have an example that you follow? Now maybe you're still querying whether or not it is right to follow human examples. Now of course, let me say first and foremost that our Saviour is our ultimate example, and scripture makes that quite clear from His own words in John 13 verse 15. Jesus said: 'I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you'. The apostles second that - in 1 Peter 2:21, Peter says: 'For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps'.

238
So, of course, we ought to sound a note of caution: we must always beware of falling into the partisan practice, that we find even in the early church in the church of Corinth where the Corinthians were wrongly elevating men and putting them on a pinnacle that they did not deserve. First Corinthians 1 verses 11-13 outlines that for us, Paul says: ‘For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I am of Apollos; and I am of Cephas’, or Peter, 'and I am of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?’. We must beware of following men to an undue extreme.

This often is the case within Christianity: a strong personality can come to the fore, and people are blessed by their ministry, and they become such devoted disciples to them that in reality what happens is that the Lord Jesus Christ can be eclipsed as the pre-eminent one. There is a danger in that that we all must beware of. But when we're looking at John tonight and speaking of following another's example, we're not talking about taking on another person's personality traits or their habits or their mannerisms - and I think that's a distinction that must be made tonight. God is not in the business of making clones and robots out of us, and if you need proof of that all you need to do is look at the 66 books of the Bible, and look at the many diverse authors that God inspired His word through. Let me say this: God did not transgress or violate their personalities when He inspired them to write God's word, that's why we can recognise Paul's writings as distinct from John's and some of the other apostles. Their personalities were left intact, even though God's Holy Spirit was inspiring them.

So when we are saying that there are men who we ought to imitate and follow, we're not talking about trying to ape someone's personality or their mannerisms. You find this especially within evangelicalism. I hear people talk about bygone days, and I've even heard it said that the great preacher Willie Mullan years ago, an evangelist, many people started to emulate him. Some people even in this church have told me that, when he was to the fore as an evangelist and Bible teacher, that what he used to do was, just after he read the Scriptures, he would turn his Bible over like that and then he would start to preach. All of a sudden all the preachers after him were starting to turn their Bible over and bang it, and start to preach. I have a friend who many years ago went to Bible College in Wales, and at that time Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones was preaching in Westminster Chapel in London - and very popular, of course, among the Welsh, as a Welshman himself. But if you ever saw him preach, I didn't have the privilege, he often would stand with one hand in his waistcoat pocket, and perhaps the glasses down at the end of his nose, and the Bible in one hand or the Bible before him. All of a sudden the young Bible students coming out of the Bible College of Wales were all standing with their left hand in their waistcoat pocket (they never used to wear waistcoats!), and the glasses at the end of their nose.

That's not what I'm talking about, and that's so often the emulation and imitation that can come into Christianity that is not biblical at all - farcical. What we're talking about, and what John is talking about, is what is found in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 1, where Paul says to the Corinthians: 'Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ'. The word for 'followers' there is 'imitators' - 'Be ye imitators of me, even as I am an imitator of Christ'. In Ephesians 5:1 he said to them: 'Be ye therefore followers', or imitators, 'of God, as dear children'. So when we speak of imitating another, and following another Christian as a role model and an example, it is only as they imitate Christ that we should imitate them - not in any other way!
There are many other verses that set forth this principle to us in the New Testament. Second Thessalonians 3 verse 7, listen to it: 'For yourselves know', Paul says, 'how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you' - 'Behave as we behave, follow our example'. Hebrews 6 and verse 12, another verse: 'That ye be not sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promise'. Imitate the faith of those who have gone before us! Hebrews 13 and verse 17: 'Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you, those that have the rule over you' - considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. It's really what the author to the Hebrews was saying in Hebrews 10:24: 'Consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works' - by your example. John is saying: 'Here is an example of a man who has been honoured in God's work, Demetrius, and I have no hesitation or qualms in setting him up as a role model for you to follow'.

Now let me ask you a very blunt but searching question tonight: if you were to look for an example as a role model to follow or, like John, you were commending an example to another young believer for them to follow, who would it be? Are they living? This is a great challenge to all of us. There are not too many men and women of God about these days. Let me say, by a little bit of a digression on this point, that we need to be careful what company we keep, because human nature is such that we tend to become like the people we are with. First Corinthians 15 verse 33 says: 'Do not be misled: bad company corrupts good character'. Sometimes we find ourselves imitating, even unconsciously, those that we spend most of our time with. You know the saying: 'Birds of a feather flock together', and if you want to talk about God's church, or God's people, or God's workers, or other people, whoever they may be, Christian or non-Christian - you'll always find people to talk to about them. No problem! But the fact of the matter is: that is no godly example to anyone. If I can encourage you tonight: always take those as your example who you know are Christlike, if you can find any.

Now Demetrius may not have had prestige, he may not have had the authority that Diotrephes had, but John was saying: 'Whatever you do, don't imitate a Diotrephes, for Diotrephes' are not of God. Imitate that which is good, Demetrius - he may not be a big shot, he may not be an intellectual, he may not hold high position in the church, he may not have tremendous gift, but he's a man of God and he has seen God!'. John said of Diotrephes: 'He has not seen God', but Demetrius obviously had. Now that's not in a literal, mystical sense, it's talking about having a real communion with the Lord through His word and through everyday experience. Do you know something? I want to look to a man as an example who has seen the Lord. I don't care if he's seen the world, I don't care if he's seen deep academic truths, as much as whether or not he has seen the Lord.

Isn't it a wonderful illustration of the truth that we don't hardly know anything about Demetrius, and he certainly doesn't seem to have the standing that Diotrephes had in a sense, but God has made the first the last and the last the first, the humble are exalted, the mighty are made low because God chooses the foolish things of this world to confound the mighty that no flesh should glory in His presence! Do you know what I've often found out? The people who are the examples to follow are not necessarily the people who are always up at the front!

Four preachers were discussing the merits of various Bible translations - as you know, that's a great topic these days. One of them admired the King James Version because of the language that it used. The second preacher, well, he liked the Revised Version; he felt it was more accurate. The third liked the New International Version because of its up-to-date vocabulary. The fourth was absolutely silent, and then finally he announced that he liked his mother's best
of all. Amazed, one of the men said: 'We didn't know your mother had translated the Bible'. 'Oh yes!', came the reply, 'She translated it into her life, and it was the most convincing translation I ever saw'. Sometimes we spend so much time debating over nonsense that we miss the whole point! Do people see a translation of God's word in our lives? What example do you follow?

Here's the second question, and the bigger one: what example are you? Verse 12 tells us that Demetrius had good report of all. Now let me say that that is not literal, we know it's not literal because he obviously hadn't a good report of Diotrephes! It's a general term speaking that most people in the church looked up to Demetrius and respected him - but you'll never ever get everyone reporting good on you. The Lord Jesus, of course, taught that in Luke 6:26: 'Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets'.

Most of the church accepted Demetrius and honoured him in God's work, except for Diotrephes, he had an exclusive mind. Now let me say tonight that we need to be very careful of falling into the trap of Diotrephes. Harry Ironside describes his spirit well towards this man Demetrius, that the rest of the church accepted, but Diotrephes rejected and refused admittance into the assembly. This is what he says: 'It matters nothing to the rigid advocates of a pseudo-church order that this man, Demetrius, is honoured of God, that he proclaims the truth, that his walk is blameless, that many can testify to his devotedness and his piety, as also to the spirituality and the helpfulness of his ministry. 'If he followeth not with us'', that's the Diotrephes attitude, 'he must be treated as a publican and a sinner, or rejected as though he were a blasphemer'. How shocking it is, and what an insult to the Head of the church, and to the Holy Spirit of God'.

Sometimes we can be like that. Listen, I have my convictions as well as the rest of you, but let me say this: there are some good, godly brethren who don't agree with me on certain less than fundamental things, but they're godlier men and women than I'll ever be. We need to have the bigness, and the broadness, and the maturity to be able to admit that!

Then notice also that 'good report of all', the tense of 'all' points to a past report that still is valid in the present. Something that people said about Demetrius that was in the past, he had good report with everybody in the past, but it's still intact today - it's valid to say that he's still held in high esteem and honour by the church presently. What a challenge! Are you here tonight and you once had a good testimony, you once had a glowing record, you once were honoured in God's work? Well, is it the case today, forget about the past, what about today? How's your testimony now?

Well, it appears that Demetrius' good testimony not only was inside the church but outside. I think we can read that into the expression 'of all', he had good report 'of all', inside and outside. Incidentally, this is one of the qualifications of an overseer, 1 Timothy 3:7: 'Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil'. This is a challenge! It's hard enough having a good report of the folk inside the church, let alone those outside the church! What do they think of us? What do they think of you? Is it a revelation to you tonight that the non-Christian has not lost all capacity to judge what is good and what is true? Christian testimonies are one of the greatest contributory factors, I believe, to the demise of Gospel influence in our day and age - those who do not have a good report of those without! Now just imagine for a moment, that all men and women inside the church had a good report of you, and all men outside the church had a good report of you - do you know what that would be? I've no doubt about it: revival! When
are we ever going to realise that the world takes its notion of God from the people who say they belong to God's family?

You know I listen - I nearly said 'religiously' - to Talkback, but you know sometimes, believe it or not, I'm sympathetic with David Dunseith because of the attitude of some so-called 'believers' who come on the telephone. They haven't a notion of how to present their case, and sometimes that's the way we come across to the world. We grate on their ears, because they're not seeing an epitome of Christ, they're seeing someone who knows all the precepts but doesn't know anything about example, doesn't know how to live it!

Friends, we need to realise, as Richard Cecil once said, that people look at us six days a week to see what we mean on the seventh day. I know it's the first day for us, but the principle is the same. Do we mean what we say? Christian, maybe you don't set yourself up as any example or any positive influence, but don't miss it - that is not my point, that isn't - my point is this: whether you like it or not, you are an example, and you are in influence, whether good or bad! The question is: whether it is good or bad? The Italian word for 'influence' is 'influenza', it was introduced into the English language in the mid-1700s speaking of 'influence' by the cold. It's very infectious, as you know - so is a good and a bad example. Is your example having influence, like the flu, on others? Or is your bad example like germs that are spreading throughout the assembly and among God's people?

Some sit in meetings like this and they feel insignificant. You perhaps feel that, you know: 'What could I do for the Lord? I don't have any obvious gifts, and they're certainly not gifts for public speaking, or anything upfront, or anything you might value as being worthwhile' - but friend, listen: no one is insignificant enough not to have influence upon others. No matter how insignificant you might feel you are, you have got influence on those around you. Never underestimate the effect of influence.

In 1645 one vote gave Oliver Cromwell control of all of England. In 1649 one vote caused Charles I of England to be executed. In 1845 one vote brought Texas into the United States. In 1868 one vote saved President Andrew Johnson from impeachment. In 1875 one vote changed France from a monarchy into a republic. In 1923 one vote gave Adolf Hitler control of the Nazi party. That's what the influence of one person can do! Albert Schweitzer said: 'Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it's the only thing'. We are big on the Word, but minute on example. Our lives should be such as men may safely copy us and imitate us - could they? I remind you of the question: what example are you? Now listen to me tonight: there are young people, and there are young Christians sitting in the wings of our meetings all over the province, and they have the potential of being a Demetrius or being a Diotrephes - what example are they observing in you?

You know some Christians, all they do is gurn. Now you put it in your own terms, but that's the way it comes to me: all they do is moan and gripe, and you go to their houses for supper and you get a tall tale about all the wrong things in the church, and how people are unloving, this, that and the other - and it's going on, and I hear about most of it, most of it comes back, and it stinks to high heaven! I'll tell you: I'm fed up with a lot of it. I don't know what God must feel about it. The big question is: what is your influence? What is your example? Someone has rightly said: 'We can do more good in being good than in any other way'.

I heard a beautiful story about the poet Robert Browning. He once wrote a poem 'Pippa Passes', about an Italian girl who, because of her poverty and her destitute family, was forced to work every day, every single day during the year, in the silk mills. But this year, for some
reason, on New Year's Day she was given a day off. In sheer joy she walked home down the streets of her town in north-east Italy singing a song of faith in words, and Browning puts it in poetic form like this:

'The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in His heaven-
All's right with the world!'.

As she walked down the narrow streets, her thankful heart free and overflowing, her song reached people who at that very moment in time, at that crucial moment, needed to hear that song. An unmarried couple were moved by her verse to make some changes to their lives. An artist who was about to lose his temper was calmed. An anarchist, intent on assassinating the Austrian emperor, was halted. A churchman planning to murder a child for money was smitten with remorse. This young girl Pippa returned home from her walk later in the day completely oblivious and unaware to the unseen effect of her attitude and her song. That is the influence that example can have!

Now look at Demetrius, verse 12 says that not only did the believers inside the church have a good report of him, unsaved people outside the church had a good report of him, the apostle John had a good report of him - but 'and of the truth itself', the truth itself witnessed to Demetrius' testimony! In other words, the genuineness of Demetrius was self-evident, and if the truth could talk it would say the same thing as the people in the church and outside and the apostle were saying - that Demetrius' life lived up to the teaching and the practices of God's word. Even God's word bore witness to Demetrius.

Now listen to me tonight: sometimes we evangelicals are all talk, all talk, a lot of hot air; and there's only a hair's breadth between us and the charity in the world. Friends, when are we going to learn to live the Christ-life? Francis of Assisi said to one of his young monks: 'Let's go down to the town and preach'. The novice was delighted at being singled out by Francis, and he was gladly going to be his companion. So he went down with him to the town, and they passed through the principal streets, they turned down many of the byways and the alleys, they made their way into the suburbs. At great length they returned to the monastery by a circuit, and they found themselves eventually at the gate. As they approached the door the young man said to Francis: 'You've forgotten that we went down to the town to preach. Wasn't that your original intention?'. 'My son', replied Francis, 'we have preached. We were preaching while we were walking. We have been seen by many. Our behaviour has been closely watched. It is thus that we preached our morning sermon'. Now let me say, whilst we believe both the preaching of the word and example are necessary, what Francis was about to say to this young man was profound and I want you to listen to it very carefully. Listen: 'It is of no use, my son, to walk anywhere to preach unless we preach everywhere we walk'. It is no use to walk anywhere to preach, unless we preach everywhere we walk. Philip Brooks, the puritan, said: 'A person who lives right and is right has more power in his silence than another has by words'.

'I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely show the way:'
The eye's a better pupil and much sharper than the ear,  
Fine counsel can confuse me, but example's always clear.

The lectures you deliver may be very wise and true,  
But I'd rather get my lessons by observing what you do!'.

What do you do? John ends this third epistle the way he did the second, with a personal touch of affection, saying that he longed to see them face-to-face. Then he speaks this word in verse 14 of peace: 'Peace be to thee'. Isn't that very appropriate in an assembly that is wracked by problems and strife? Here is Diotrephes stirring up problems, and the apostle is pronouncing peace upon them! Now listen to me tonight: a church may look outwardly successful, but the peace of God - listen to me on what the peace of God is: we understand 'peace' as being the absence of war or conflict, but in the Bible it is a positive term that invokes the blessing of Almighty God even in the presence of storms, troubles, trials, perplexities. Ultimately what it is is the very presence of Christ!

I can show you that from John chapter 20. The disciples are all afraid, and we read: 'Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you'. Verse 26 of John 20: 'And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you'. Now listen to me tonight: here is a church wracked by problems that we can only imagine, and these problems in the first century Christian church did not stay in the church, because this is the life in any church today - perhaps, could I go as far as to say, in every church today - because there's no perfect church! But what this tells me in a tremendously positive light is that you don't need the church to be perfect to know the peace and the presence of Christ. There never was a perfect church, but the real challenge and question is: is anyone really prepared to let the Lord Jesus change us, and change our church? Will it be 'my will' or 'His will'?

That will determine, no matter how many problems you have in your church, that will determine whether you as an individual will be a Diotrephes to hinder God's work, or a Gaius to help God's work, or a Demetrius to be honoured in God's work. But here's my question, listen: some of you don't have too long on this scene, what will your epitaph be? You've heard of the Nobel Peace Prize, haven't you? Do you know how it came about? One morning in 1888, Alfred Nobel, who was the inventor of dynamite and a man who had spent his life amassing a fortune from the manufacture and sale of weapons, awoke to read in his morning newspaper his own obituary. The obituary was printed as a result of a simple journalistic error: Alfred's brother had died, and a French reporter carelessly had reported the death of the wrong brother. I'll bet that put him off his cornflakes! Any man, you could imagine, would have been disturbed under those circumstances - but Alfred was very very shocked and overwhelmed, because he saw himself for the first time the way the rest of the world saw him. They called him 'The Dynamite King', the great industrialist who had made immense fortune from explosives.

As far as the general public was concerned, the entire purpose of his life, so said the obituary, was to be a merchant of death. That morning, as he read down his own obituary with shocking horror, he resolved from that day on to make clear to the world the true meaning and purpose of his life. He decided to do it by disposing of his fortune when he died, and his last will and testament would be the expression of his life's ideals. The result was the most valued of prizes, given to this day to those who have done most for the cause of world peace
- the Nobel Peace Prize. But here's my challenge to you my friend tonight: imagine tomorrow morning, your obituary suddenly appears in the paper. Would it say anything in any way related to God's work? Or would it be all about your own work, your own career, your family, your academic achievements? Just entertain the frightful thought for a moment: what would it say? When all is said and done - is this not what really matters - what will your life be known for? What will you be remembered for? A Gaius who helped God's work, a Demetrius who was honoured in God's work to this very day, or a Diotrephes, a hinderer of God's work?

Can I leave you with the challenge of Socrates, who said: 'Let him who would move the world first move himself'. First, second and third John have been before us all - it is our responsibility to do whatever moving is necessary. May God bless His word to all our hearts.

Lord, we thank You for everything that we have gleaned - but, oh God, we cannot pray a prayer any better than what we have just sung. We need to get like Jesus, we know one day we will be like Him. But Lord, forgive us when through our actions - and all of us are guilty, I am guilty - through word and thought and deed of hindering your work, and we're all guilty; but help us all to repent, help us all to put away sin, whatever that sin may be. We pray: 'Come in Thy sweetness, come in Thy fullness, stamp Thine own image deep on our hearts', that You may receive all the glory, for Christ's sake, Amen.
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